WHEN MIRANDA HUNTS HER MAN! by CLARK GRAY

RANGELAND ROMANCES

25¢

MAY

COQUETTE'S CALL TO ARMS

by MARIAN O'HEARN

• ROMANCES OF THE OLD FRONTIER •

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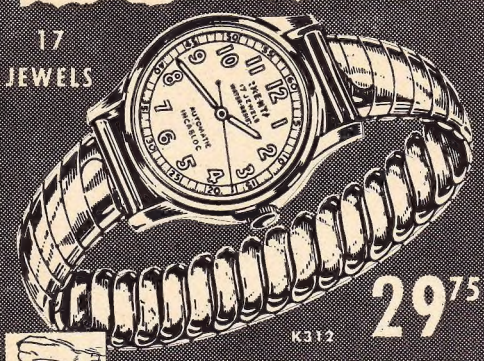

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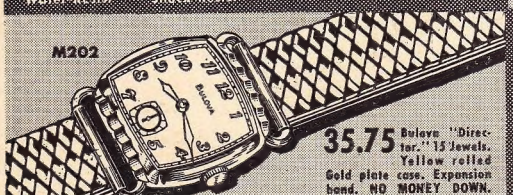

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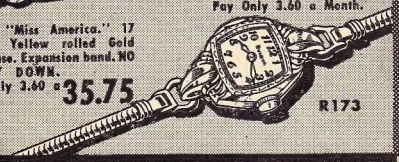

R173

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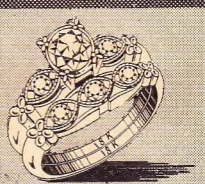

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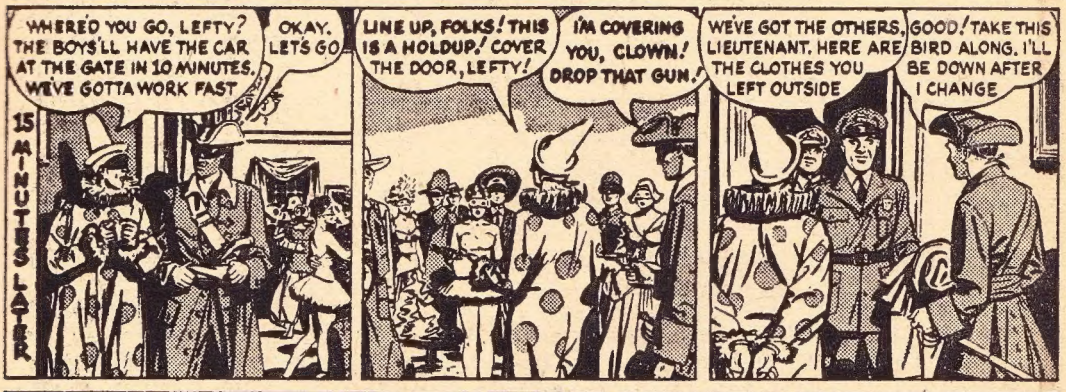
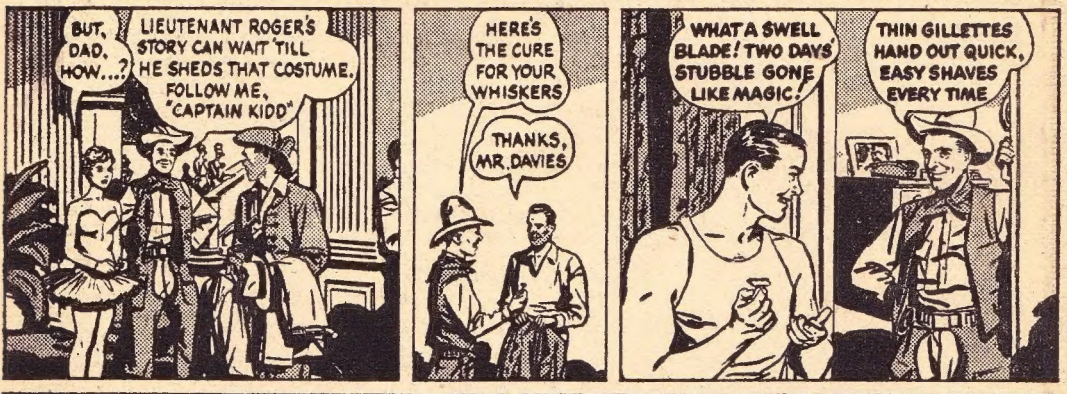
WHILE MOST OF THE GUESTS OF LORIMER DAVIES, WEALTHY MANUFACTURER, ARE ENJOYING HIS MASQUERADE PARTY, "CAPTAIN KIDD" SEEMS TO HAVE ENCOUNTERED TROUBLE...


WHERE'D YOU GO, LEFTY? THE BOYS'LL HAVE THE CAR AT THE GATE IN 10 MINUTES. WE'VE GOTTA WORK FAST
OKAY. LET'S GO
15 MINUTES LATER
LINE UP, FOLKS! THIS IS A HOLDUP! COVER THE DOOR, LEFTY!
I'M COVERING YOU, CLOWN! DROP THAT GUN!
WE'VE GOT THE OTHERS, LIEUTENANT. HERE ARE THE CLOTHES YOU LEFT OUTSIDE
GOOD! TAKE THIS BIRD ALONG. I'LL BE DOWN AFTER I CHANGE


BUT, DAD, HOW...?
LIEUTENANT ROGER'S STORY CAN WAIT TILL HE SHEDS THAT COSTUME. FOLLOW ME, "CAPTAIN KIDD"
HERE'S THE CURE FOR YOUR WHISKERS
THANKS, MR. DAVIES
WHAT A SWELL BLADE! TWO DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!
THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME

I KNEW LEFTY WAS COMING AS "CAPTAIN KIDD", BUT I COULDN'T IDENTIFY HIS PAL, SO...
GREAT WORK!
JUST THE CHAP TO HEAD UP OUR ATOMIC SECURITY FORCE
M-M-M-HANDSOME

YOU ENJOY SMOOTHER, BETTER-LOOKING SHAVES AT A REAL SAVING WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE APPROACHES THEM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T"... PROTECT YOU FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
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Combined with
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Volume Fifty-One | May, 1952 | Number One

Romance of the Frontier Trails

WHEN MIRANDA HUNTS HER MAN! ..... **Clark Gray** 12
The red-lipped charmer knew she wouldn't stay single long—in that wagon-train full of men!

Stirring Western Novelettes

COQUETTE'S CALL TO ARMS ..... **Marian O'Hearn** 50
When glamorous Risa declared war on the army—what soldier could call himself safe?

DUDE IN HER HEART ..... **Thomas Calvert** 90
He was green as grass at riding and roping—but he sure was a tophand at love!
Copyright, 1942, by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Music and Madness."

Love Stories of the Range

THIS STAGE TO PARADISE! ..... **B. C. De Pascal** 30
It was mighty unfair of the handsome stranger—to kiss her fiancé right out of her heart!

A KISS FOR THE ENEMY ..... **A. C. Abbott** 40
She had reason a-plenty for hating that law-dog—but what girl's heart ever listened to reason?

I'LL LOVE YOU MAÑANA ..... **McKay Henry, Jr.** 70
Anita was going to break the cardinal rule of love: Always let the hombre do the asking!

THE OUTLAW AND THE ANGEL ..... **L. P. Holmes** 80
Tracy might be a badman to the law, but to Alda he was just plain—*her* man.
Copyright, 1938, by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Love Rides the Storm."

Rangeland Features

PONY EXPRESS ..... **A Department** 6
Here are some swell new pen pals for you to meet.

PIN-UP GIRL ..... **A Contest** 29
Look up this prairie princess and win a prize.

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A new picture feature to tell you about the coming issue.

Homemaker's Corral

MAKE YOUR OWN RANCH CLOTHES ..... **A Department** 78

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK ..... **Myrtle Juliette Corey** 105

Next Issue Will be Published May 2nd.

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City..... Zone..... State.....

PONY EXPRESS

Get acquainted with these lively pen pals.

Buenas Dias, pards,

Here comes that tireless rider again, with a new saddlebag full of leters from gals and rannies from all over the globe. If you enjoy reading them why not get busy and send off an answer or two? It's a swell way to corral a whole new herd of friends.

Incidentally, to those lucky few who see your letters in print in this and other issues, we're counting on you to do your level best to reply to just as many pen pals as you possibly can. A lot of you promise to answer every letter, but some of you must have slipped up a little, because we've been hearing that some pen pals have been disappointed. Maybe more letters pile up than you expect, but we know you sincerely want to try to answer them all. So grab those pens, folks—don't let your pards down!

Now for the star line-up of pen pals for this month:

Cuban Cow Bunny

Dear Editor:

From beautiful Cuba comes a plea for pen pals. Would you be so kind as to print it? I should like to correspond with ladies only, all ages, all places, all over the world.

I'm Cuban, 36 years old, have dark brown hair, blue eyes and am married. My hobbies are collecting dress pins, hankies, photos of my friends and reading American magazines. I like some sports—swimming, baseball, football.

I should like to exchange photos, hobbies and magazines. I'll answer all letters so please write soon.

GLADYS M. DE ZAYAS
San Lazaro 954, Apt. 3
Havana, Cuba

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

Lady With the Lamp

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping that this will get entered in the Pony Express. I am a student nurse and I love to receive loads of letters and promise to answer each one between duty hours.

So, please everyone, how about cheering up a lonely nurse, and filling her mailbox with your letters? I will exchange photos with the first ten.

EILEEN HARRIS
Nurses Residence
Mercy Hospital
Portsmouth, O.

Draftsmen Wanted

Dear Editor:

I have tried various ways of getting in touch with pen pals who are drafstmen, but have had no luck. Thus I am writing to you, hoping my luck will be better through your magazine. I'm a Canadian Chinese, male, 21 years old. After five years of schooling, I graduated from a technical school, where I majored in drafting. At present I work as a junior draftsman in a local electrical manufacturing firm.

Architectural mechanical drawing is what I like best, but I also like lithographic printing which I know quite well. I'm not barring non-draftsmen from writing, either, because I would like to hear from anyone, boys or girls.

GEORGE YEE
2696 Eton Street
Vancouver, B. C.

Foreign Correspondent

Dear Editor:

Is there any chance for an Austrian to ride the Pony Express? I am section manager at a road-building and construction company in Vienna. My age is 25, my hair dark blond, my eyes gray and my height 5 ft. 6½ in. I weigh 135 lbs. As a souvenir of the last war, I have to wear glasses.

My hobbies include all kinds of sports, especially swimming, sailing, riding and skiing. I am very fond of dancing and music of all kinds—from swing to boogie-woogie to grand opera. I like gaiety and fun and love to spend as much time as possible outdoors photographing things.

Letters from gals would be most welcome of all, but I would like them from everyone. Please write me soon, folks, for I'm anxious to be in touch with all of you in the States and in other parts of the world.

JOE WACLENA
Siedlung-Wienerfeld-Ost 186
Vienna, X, Austria

Armchair Tourist

Dear Editor:

Hey, what's wrong with the Hoosier State? Doesn't anyone want a pen pal from Indiana? I'll just keep trying until I hit the jackpot, because I sure do like to write letters. I'm a stamp and view-card fiend, so come on, girls, married or single—age doesn't matter—I have bushels of duplicate stamps and will send view cards to all who wish to exchange.

All sports are fine with me and I want plenty of pals to keep me busy while my husband works nights. Love to travel. Shall I tell you about my armchair tours? Well, drop me a card and I will. All letters will be answered if I have to hire a secretary.

Mrs. J. C. McWHIRTER
2917½ S. Madison
Muncie, Indiana

Railroad Widow

Dear Editor:

Being a railroader's wife, I am alone a lot and have time for writing letters. That's why I would like to see my letter published in the Pony Express.

During World War II, I was an army nurse, but now I am a housewife and mother. I am 29 years old and have auburn hair and blue eyes. I'll be glad to exchange snapshots. I'll be watching my mailbox.

EDITH WADE
353 Elm Street
Chillicothe, Illinois

Long Time Gone

Dear Editor:

If it is at all possible, would you include me in your next roundup of Pony Express mail? I have been overseas for over three years and I get most of my news from the newspapers. I'd like to start getting some through the mail.

My home is in Kearny, New Jersey. I'm 22 years old, blue-eyed, brown-haired and 5 ft. 10 in. tall. I'm a high-school graduate and intend to go to college whenever I return to the States. One of my favorite hobbies is swapping photographs and addresses, so that in case I ever travel I will have friends all over. So I will appreciate all the mail I can get. Anyone interested in writing to me?

Sgt. WILLIAM HEBERER
7360th Base Complement Squadron
Tulln Air Base
APO 777, c/o Postmaster
New York, New York

Views From Varsity View

Dear Editor:

This is our first attempt at writing to your Pony Express. We are two 15-year-old Canadian girls who hope to rope ourselves a few pen pals all over the world.

Betty is 5 ft. 6 in. tall, has brown hair, hazel eyes and weighs about 120 lbs. Wilma is 5 ft. 3 in. tall, weighs 103 lbs. and has brown hair and blue eyes.

We both like baseball, writing letters, collecting stamps and snapshots, and lots of other things. We would be very glad indeed to hear from boys

(Continued on page 10)

NOW, the pipe smoker's dream come true!

Every Pipeful Proves . . .

DR. PHILIP'S PIPE IS THE BEST!

The ideal pipe for the STEADY SMOKER, the NEW SMOKER and the man who doesn't like an ordinary pipe.

- NO BREAKING IN!
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- FEATHER-WEIGHT!
- FLAT BASE, WILL NOT TIP!
- FINEST QUALITY IMPORTED BRIAR!
- INTERCHANGEABLE CERAMIC FILTER BOWLS!

This cross section shows the interchangeable inner ceramic bowl which burns tobacco dry, cool and clean. The bowl acts as a non-burning sponge that absorbs all of the tar and most of the nicotine. The metal radiator ring on top of the Dr. Philip's pipe is the only part that can get hot. It takes the heat from the ceramic and gives it off to the air FAST. The smoke circulates in the space between the inner bowl and the outer briar shell, becoming COOL before you draw it. Your tobacco cannot get wet because cotton or paper tissue packed in the space below the inner bowl absorbs all of the saliva and condensation. Rotate the ceramic bowls over and over again as you would a set of ordinary pipes. Dr. PHILIP'S pipe is EASY to CLEAN. There is no need to knock this pipe against any object to get out the ash. It does not form a cake. There is no need to rest the Dr. PHILIP'S pipe for cooling or drying. It has a constant capacity. The SHORT SMOKE MODEL will hold enough tobacco for a pleasure packed smoke of 15 to 25 minutes and the LONG SMOKE MODEL will last from 45 minutes to a full hour!

THE LONGER LASTING PIPE—YOU GET 4 EXTRA BOWLS!

SHORT SMOKE MODEL
Including 4 EXTRA BOWLS **only $4.50**

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Including 4 EXTRA BOWLS **only $5.50**

If not satisfied that this is the most amazing pipe you have ever owned, return within ten days and your money will be refunded!

QUALITY AGENCY
270 Park Avenue
New York 17, New York

Please send me postpaid.....DR. PHILIP'S pipe(s). I enclose $..... to cover the cost of the pipe(s) I have checked below.

☐ SHORT SMOKE MODEL including 4 EXTRA BOWLS @ $4.50
☐ LONG SMOKE MODEL including 4 EXTRA BOWLS @ $5.50

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... ZONE.... STATE.....
(Sorry, no C.O.D.'s) 4-52

(Continued from page 8)

and girls both, between the ages of 15 and 20. We promise to answer all letters and are quite willing to exchange pictures.

BETTY PAULSON
and
WILMA VANCE
Varsity View, Manitoba
Canada

Cowpoke From Carmen

Dear Editor:

How about making room for me in your Pony Express? I live on a ranch and get pretty lonely, seeing the same guys and cattle all the time. Of course, cows can't talk or write letters, so how about some of you pen friends pitching in?

I'm 6 ft. 1 in. tall, 21 years old, have blue eyes and brown hair and am fairly good looking. Wouldn't some pretty little gal like to hear from a lonely cowhand?

ROY BRUMLEY
c/o Keystone Ranch
Carmen, Idaho

Ten-shun!

Dear Editor:

Will you please let a very nice girl whose hobby is writing to servicemen borrow a small space in which to make a plea for some new pen pals? I respect servicemen very much for the big job they're doing for me and figure I can best show my appreciation to them by writing to every one of them who cares to write me.

I'm 17 years old, have short blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin. My height is 5 ft. 7 in., and I weigh 135 lbs. I'm now a struggling senior in school, hoping to graduate soon.

Okay, boys, I've met you halfway. I dare you to come the rest.

EVELYN SUTTON
Pembroke, Georgia

No Sad Songs For Him

Dear Editor:

Here's a soldier stationed in the Canal Zone. I'm not going to give you a sob story about how lonely I get or how I don't have anyone to write to. I'll just say I would like to get letters from girls between the ages of 17 and 20.

I'm 20 years old myself, have brown hair, brown eyes, weigh 152 lbs., and stand around 5 ft. 9 in. tall. I hail from Texas. I'd like to swap photographs and am looking forward to some letters soon.

Pvt. JOE CARTER
RA 18265800
Btry D, 903 AAA AW Bn. MBL.
Fort William D. Davis, Canal Zone

May Baby

Dear Editor:

Connecticut gal here, trying for the Pony Express. Although I've never been in the wide open spaces and riding a horse makes me seasick, I sure do love to write. I hereby swear—scout's honor—to answer all the letters I receive, so help me! It may take me a while to do it, but eventually I'll get there.

Since people like to know what they are writing to, suppose I hand out a few particulars. I'm 22 and a May baby—and a mighty loud one, my mother says. I have golden blonde hair—shoulder length—green eyes, and stand 5 ft. 7 in. tall in my stocking feet—but I do wear shoes most of the time. I haven't cracked any mirrors lately, so I guess I'll pass as far as the looks department is concerned. Anyway, I'll pass out photographs, so you can judge for yourself.

As for my interests, my favorite pastime is dancing—any kind of dancing. I'd rather dance than eat, believe me. I do like to read and enjoy most sports, with swimming taking the lead. The fact that we live right near the ocean may explain why.

So, come on, people, fill my mailbox full. Keeping my fingers crossed is kind of tiring, but if it will help, I'll do it. I'll try to be a good correspondent.

HELEN ROSEN
507 Washington Village
South Norwalk, Connecticut

Florida Boy

Dear Editor:

I am not a cowboy and do not live on a ranch—just a soldier in Uncle Sam's army. But I would like to receive letters from anyone, any age.

Bamberg, Germany, is my temporary home. I have red wavy hair, stand 5 ft. 10 in. and weigh 160 lbs. My permanent home is Miami, Florida. I could tell everyone about Europe and also send pictures, and I promise to answer all letters.

Cpl. DAVID D. PINKSTON
RA 14333930
Co. C, 26 Inf.
APO 139, c/o Postmaster
New York, New York

Wanda Is Waiting

Dear Editor:

Could a little old gal from the Southwest hitch a ride on the Pony Express? Well, here's hoping she can.

I'm 16 years old and stand a little over 5 ft. 4 in. tall. I have light brown hair and dark eyes. I like sports—any kind, especially swimming and horseback riding and midget auto racing. I collect Indian relics of all kinds.

So, come on, all you cowpokes and cowgals—if you toss me a line, I'm willing to answer, pronto!

WANDA RICE
Route 1
Pawhuska, Oklahoma

The Eyes Have It!

Dear Editor:

I have written many times for American pen friends and have received no reply whatsoever. Now I am giving it one more try. Please won't

(Continued on page 111)

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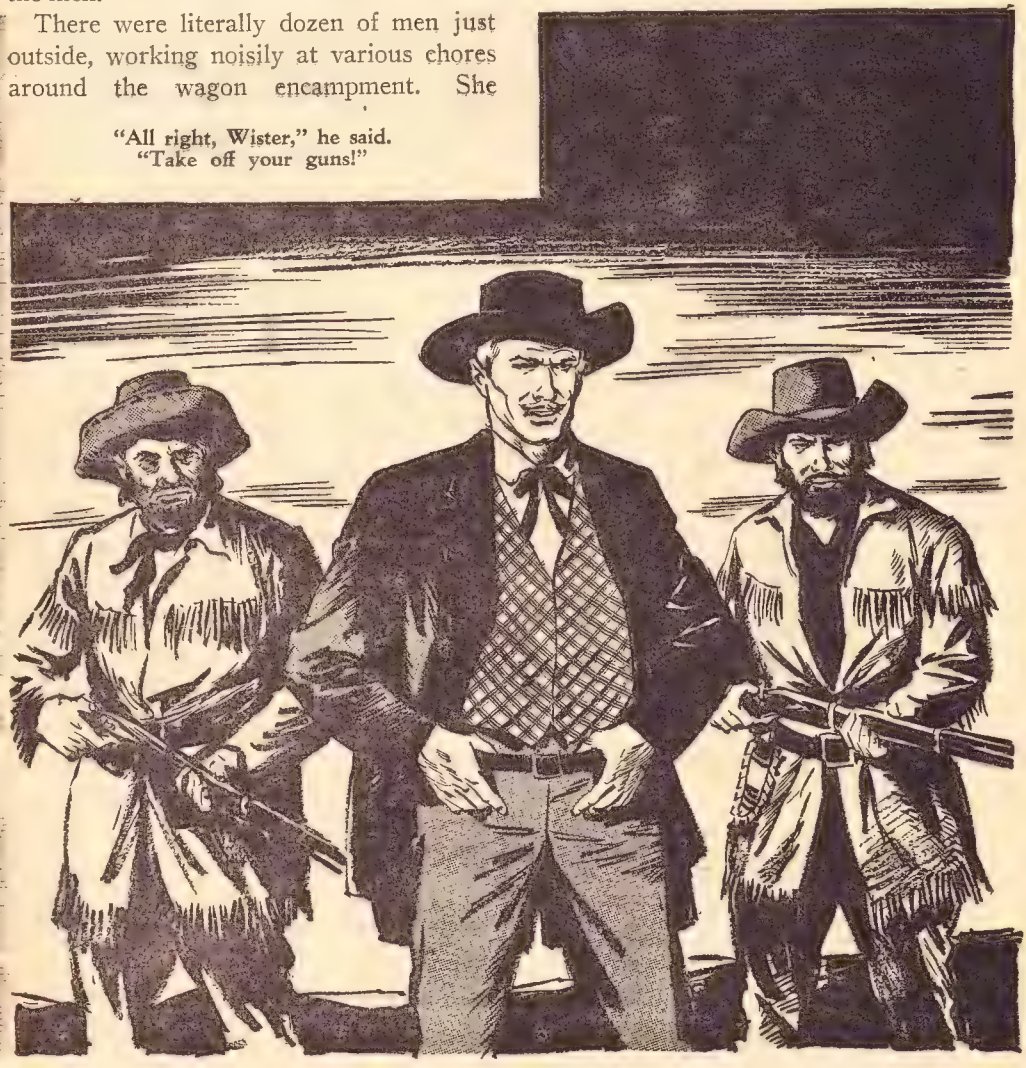
WHEN MIRANDA

CHAPTER ONE

Rich Pickings!

IN THE Conestoga, Miranda was hidden from prying eyes by the great canvas tarp. She sat on a stack of newsprint with her dress hiked up over her knees and the churn between her feet. She was pumping the dasher of the churn vigorously, but absent-mindedly, a faint smile on her lips. Her thoughts were on the men.

There were literally dozen of men just outside, working noisily at various chores around the wagon encampment. She could hear their brassy masculine voices. She could see some of the men through the oval-shaped opening of her own vehicle. Busily shoeing horses, shrinking tires to big wooden wheels, loading wagons, repairing harness, cooking before open campfires. Big men and little ones, bearded and clean-shaven, old and young, fat and



"All right, Wister," he said. "Take off your guns!"

HUNTS HER MAN!

Novelette of a Conestoga Queen

By Clark Gray

It was sheer paradise for that husband-hunting minx—
three months on the trail with 200 men!

skinny. Miranda grinned and gave the dasher an exuberant, extra little flip.

She was happy enough to bust. For tomorrow the wagon train would push off through the muddy forests of the Indian Nations, bound for California. They'd be three months on the trail. Three months with some two hundred men and only about fifty women, and most of the women were married.

If I can't hook one this summer, Miranda thought, I'd better change the bait.

The butter came, then, and she hummed as she poured the buttermilk into a big crock and covered it with a towel. She put the butter into a smaller crock and squeezed past the printing press and her dad's old mahogany dresser to the front of the cramped wagon. She stepped down off the tongue of the wagon onto grassy turf, and there was Bridget, gazing at Miranda placidly out of big brown eyes.

"Hello, Bridget," Miranda said, and she held out her crock of butter. "See here. Out of just two milkings. Thanks, old girl."

Bridget gravely began to chew her cud. Bridget was Jersey on her mother's side and Guernsey on her pa's. She was six years old, just one third Miranda's own age. But Bridget was much more sensible, Miranda thought, because nothing ever excited her.

"I bought some corn chop," Miranda said. "I'll give you a bait tonight, Bridget."

Bridget just kept on chewing her cud. Miranda laughed and moved off toward the spring, threading through the scattered groups of working, sweating, shouting men. She was conscious of a subdued whistle or two. One man, jacking up a wagon in his undershirt, sat down on his haunches to stare at her. Another shouted, "Hey, honey, want me to work your butter for you?"

Miranda felt a warm, pleased flush on her cheeks. She lifted her head a little and moved on, smiling, her slim-legged stride covering the ground rapidly. At the clear bubbling spring she plunged her crock into the cool water, filling it, then began to work the last of the buttermilk out of the butter with a wooden paddle. She did it rapidly, skillfully, her bare forearms rippling with firm young muscle. She began to sing softly to herself as she worked, taking satisfaction in the bright yellow cleanliness of the butter. It was the same satisfaction she took out of any honest work, out of setting a line of type, out of keeping her father's house spotlessly shining, whenever her father had a house.

She poured the milky water off the butter and filled the crock afresh. "Hi, Kitten," her dad said behind her.

Miranda turned and grinned at her dad standing there. He was a skinny, gray-headed figure in inky clothes. He had his old straw hat cocked to one side, and his gold-rimmed spectacles were pushed down on his nose so he could look at her over the tops of them. Despite the spectacles, he seemed youngish and carefree, standing silhouetted as he was against the scattered backdrop of the wagon encampment.

"Hi, Pop," she said. "Where you been?"

"Investigating the laws," her dad said. "Miranda, it's astounding!"

"You mean you've spent all day looking up some old laws?"

"Yes," her dad said. "It's tyranny! I'm going to write an editorial about it."

"You could have been checking the wagon," Miranda said severely. "One of the tires is loose, and there's a crack in the coupling pole."

"Miranda," he said. "Did you know they've forbidden spirituous liquors in the Indian Nations? It's a clear violation of the Bill of Rights."

Miranda sighed. She looked at her dad with weary affection. She opened her mouth to bawl him out, then closed it because she knew a bawling out wouldn't do any good. She shook her head.

"It's all right, Pop. I hired a blacksmith to fix the tire and put on a new coupling pole."

"Why, of course." He looked at her in surprise. "I knew I could count on you to attend to those trifling details, Miranda."

"Yes," Miranda said bitterly. "I guess you did." She dumped the water off her butter and threw salt in it and began to work the paddle. Her dad peered at her shrewdly a moment, then hunkered down beside her. Miranda heard his knee creak.

"You better straighten out, Pop," she said. "You'll get the rheumatism again."

"I reckon." Her dad grunted and stretched out his legs and sat on the ground.

"Don't get your breeches dirty," Miranda said.

"Hang it, Kitten," her dad grumbled. "What ails you?"

Miranda grinned. She regarded her dad speculatively a moment, wondering whether to confide in him. She always had before, but this was different. Still, she thought, he was her dad, and he had a right to know.

"Pop," she said. "I'm eighteen now. That's a grown-up woman. Old enough to—to do anything I want." She flushed a little and paid stricter attention to the butter than was necessary. "There's a plenty of men on this wagon train. I sort of thought I'd pick me out one and—and marry him."

FOR just a moment, Miranda imagined she saw deep grooves come into her father's gaunt face. The grooves seemed to run from his eyes down to the corners of his mouth, making him look strangely old. Then her dad put a forefinger to the nose-piece of his gold-rimmed spectacles, pushed them back, blinked, and the lines went away and he grinned. Miranda decided it had been her imagination.

"Congratulations, Kitten," her dad said. "I reckon it is about time for you to pair off, at that. But who's the lucky man?"

"I don't know," Miranda said. "I haven't looked the crop over. But you do think it's all right?"

"All right! I think it's wonderful." Her dad beamed at her expansively. "I'll even help you. I'm an expert judge of human nature, you know. I'll bring some of the boys around."

"Oh, no!" Miranda said. "Not that!"

Her dad looked pained. "You mean you don't trust my judgment?"

"Pop," Miranda said. "Remember that banker's son, back in Alabama? He was all set to propose to me when you got in an argument with the banker about the tariff. The banker got mad and called in your loan, and we had to leave *that* town."

Her dad snorted. "The man was a fool. He couldn't understand that the primary function of the tariff is—"

"Don't tell me," Miranda said. "I'm not interested in the tariff. But I *was* interested in the banker's son."

"That whelp!" Her dad peered at her searchingly. "Kitten, were you interested in the boy, or his money?"

Miranda felt her cheeks grow warm. "All right. What if I was? Money never hurt anything. And he was a nice boy. The protective type."

"The protective type!" Her dad made a sour face. It reminded Miranda of the time he had been sick with ague and the doctor perscribed quinine. She'd had to hold his nose and pour the quinine down his throat. "There ain't no such thing as the protective type, Kitten. All men are selfish. Some will admit it and some won't; that's the only difference."

"Maybe," Miranda said. "And maybe not. Anyhow, I want to pick my own man, Pop. Promise me you won't interfere."

"Bring your butter," her dad said. "Let's get back to the wagon. I got to write that editorial."

Sighing, Miranda stood up and helped her dad to his feet. His knee creaked

again as he put his weight on it. He grunted in annoyance.

"Drat it," he said. "I'm getting old."

"You didn't promise," Miranda reminded him.

"I ain't going to promise," her dad said. "It won't do no harm, Kitten, if I bring a nice young man around some evening. Will it?"

Back at the wagon, Miranda bustled around cooking supper. Her dad spread a blanket on the grass and began to compose an editorial with a stub pencil and a piece of copy paper.

Cooking on an open campfire, with all her utensils and materials in the cramped confines of the wagon, wasn't an easy task. It was somewhat like living out of a suitcase. But Miranda had lived out of a suitcase often enough in her dad's haphazard wanderings from town to town. She had cooked before under worse difficulties than this, and so she was humming cheerfully again when she set out the steak and potato salad before her dad.

After supper, she gave Bridget her bait of corn and received in return a bucket of foamy milk. Miranda was straining up the milk in the front part of the darkened wagon when her dad came toward her from the rear. As he squeezed past the printing press, Miranda saw that he was carrying a lantern, his roll of copy paper, and a brown quart bottle.

"What's in the bottle, Pop?"

Her dad set down the lantern, took a swig out of the bottle, and unrolled his copy paper.

"Finished my editorial. Only I don't know if we've got enough *e*'s to set it up. How many *e*'s we got, Miranda?"

Miranda sniffed. From the brown bottle she detected a prune-like, alcoholic odor. "Pop. What's in the bottle?"

"Wait'll we get to California," her dad said. "I'm going to buy me some new type and set up a real newspaper."

"Pop!" Miranda said.

"All right," her dad said. "It's only some prune extract. Good for the liver."

Miranda scowled. "There's nothing wrong with your liver."

"There is now," her dad said. "Ever since I found out about that law. They may not let spiritous liquors into the Nations, but they can't keep medicine out."

Miranda groaned in exasperation. "Dang you, Pop. You don't give a hang about liquor, and you know it! You go for weeks without taking a drink! You're just being ornery again!"

"They ain't going to deprive me of my right," her dad said. "You ought to read the Constitution, Kitten. Or my editorial. Here." He extended the copy paper.

"I don't want to read it. Dern it, Pop, if you get in trouble again—if you spoil this for me—" She stopped, because her lips were trembling.

Her dad looked at her curiously. His gaunt face was suddenly grave. "Why, Kitten," he said, "You know your happiness is the most important thing on earth to me."

"I know it," Miranda said. "That's what makes it tough." She forced her lips to stop trembling and managed a smile. "I'm going to the dance tonight, Pop. I'll read your editorial tomorrow. You get your pipe and relax and drink your danged liver extract."

"All right, Kitten." Her dad leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Have a good time. And if you meet any prospects, bring 'em around. I'll give 'em a sales talk. Ain't nothing like salesmanship to turn a bashful young bachelor into a husband."

CHAPTER TWO

Meet Mr. Brownlee

MIRANDA had plenty of ideas in her pretty blonde head, as was only natural for a girl of eighteen. But one idea she emphatically did not have was to bring any young man around to hear her dad's salesmanship. The very thought brought a blush to her cheeks as she picked her way through the campfires, toward the fiddles wailing in the distance.

The group of emigrants who made up the membership of the wagon train were all comparative strangers, having banded together at Fort Smith to make the long trek to California in the safety and comfort of numbers. Most of them were young men, bound for the adventure of the gold fields. There were a dozen or so families, and a few single girls of Miranda's age. As she reached the dancing area, she saw a cluster of lanterns hung on a pole to provide light for the dance floor.

The floor itself consisted of a layer of wagon end-gates placed carefully over level sod. Fiddle music lifted sweetly to the shining stars; the voice of the caller was hoarse and rasping over the sound of pounding feet. There were twenty or thirty couples on the floor, Miranda saw. About half of the couples were composed of one man and one brightly dressed woman. The others were made up of two men each, with one man wearing the heifer brand, a handkerchief tied around his arm.

As she approached, Miranda heard a whoop, "Hyar's the butter gal, boys," and she was half swept, half pulled out to the floor. After a momentary scuffle, a pair of brawny arms seized her and she was thrust into a square of four couples. Almost before she realized it she was spinning from arm to arm, tracing the intricate figures with her heart pounding and an excited laugh bubbling in her throat.

It was so wonderful! Miranda thought. To be young, to be bound on an adventurous journey to distant California. To be the center of all these grinning men. To be dancing under the night sky with a glittering future before her as bright and as effervescent as the starlight itself. She felt her heart swell within her till it choked up her throat as she swung from man to man, from smiling face to smiling face. Her cheeks were afire.

First it was a laughing, blue-denimed youngster with a mop of brown hair. Then it was a man with a yellow mustache. Then it was a sweaty fat man with beads of moisture running down plump cheeks. Then it was the buckskin-clad guide, a gaunt oldster, but nimbler on his moccasined feet than any of the others.

When the square ended, Miranda found herself taken in tow by a matronly woman in a polka-dot dress, who introduced herself as Mrs. Thompson. Mrs. Thompson was gray-haired and fat and cheerful.

"My Walter's the wagon captain," Mrs. Thompson said, taking Miranda's small hand in her own big, work-worn fingers. "He wants I should make the ladies acquainted."

Miranda dutifully followed Mrs. Thompson's broad beam across the floor to where the women were grouped now, a bright cluster of color under the lanterns. She smiled and curtseyed and acknowledged the introductions. Most of the women were somewhat frayed and had a married look. A few, however, were pink cheeked and clear eyed and obviously more interested in the men grouped around the cider barrel than in Miranda.

That's the competition, Miranda thought. But they're none as pretty as I.

Then she flushed and felt ashamed of herself, because it was a nasty thought, and Miranda didn't believe in nasty thoughts. She wanted everybody to be happy. Only, she added to herself, they better stay away from my man, once I pick one!

RS. THOMPSON turned from her gossiping to give Miranda a searching, smiling look. "Child, you look fresh and pretty enough to eat. But this dancing'll likely go on for hours, and I can see you're the type to hit every lick. You better let me give you a cup of tea to keep you from getting bedraggled."

Miranda smiled pleasantly and accompanied Mrs. Thompson to the campfire. She didn't really want any tea, but it was best to be polite, she knew. Mrs. Thompson capably poured out a tin cup of the stuff and put it in her hand. The cup was hot and steaming in Miranda's fingers as she drank. Mrs. Thompson eyed her curiously.

"You'll be wanting to catch a man, I expect," Mrs. Thompson said.

Miranda blinked, then blushed. "Is it that plain?"

"Poof!" Mrs. Thompson said. "You re a pretty girl, ain't you? What pretty girl don't want a man?" Mrs. Thompson giggled. "Honey, you just tell me what style you're looking for. I'll introduce you. I know 'em all, being as my Walter's wagon captain."

Miranda grinned. "You're an old matchmaker."

"I reckon." Mrs. Thompson giggled again. "It's a satisfaction. Gives an old woman something to do."

"Well," Miranda said thoughtfully. "I —I guess I want a handsome man."

"What gal don't!" Mrs. Thompson snorted through her nose.

"And protective," Miranda said. "The kind who takes care of a girl, instead of a girl having to take care of him."

Mrs. Thompson looked at her oddly. "Honey, you *are* a little green, ain't you?"

"A gentleman," Miranda explained. "You know."

"Sure, honey. I know." Inexplicably, Mrs. Thompson sighed. "Well, I won't tell you no different. Maybe you'll have better luck than most. I take it a little money wouldn't hurt none, either, eh?"

Miranda felt her ears redden, but she bit her lip and nodded. "Money's a comfort."

"'Tis indeed," Mrs. Thompson said, somewhat tartly, Miranda thought. "All right. I'll introduce Baxter Brownlee to you. He's rich and a gentleman, or so it appears. I oughtn't to do it, maybe, but . . ." Mrs. Thompson fell silent. Her fat, comfortable face was twisted a little with some secret thought. At length she shrugged and took the cup from Miranda's fingers and set it down carefully. There was the neat precision of a good housekeeper in the movement. When Mrs. Thompson swung back to Miranda, her eyes were worried.

"One more thing, child. Walter wanted I should speak to all the women. It's about the trouble we might have."

Miranda said, "You mean the raiders?" And at Mrs. Thompson's grim nod she shivered a little, and an unpleasant ripple of fear went tingling down her spine. Miranda didn't really know anything about the raiders, and neither did anybody else. But she had heard the rumors of vanishing wagon trains.

Whole trains, the rumors said, had disappeared somewhere between Edwards Trading Post and Santa Fe. Somewhere on the sandy, sage-covered flats of the brand-new Texas Panhandle, a mysterious something-or-other lay waiting to trap unwary emigrants. Nobody knew where it was or precisely what it was, except that it was not Indians. The only concrete evidence was mostly of negative character. Three wagon trains last year had passed Edwards and failed to reach Santa Fe. A detachment of soldiers sent from Fort Gibson to investigate had returned empty-handed.

Miranda had heard the rumors that a few of the wagons from last year's trains had turned up for sale in Santa Fe, in Fort

Smith, in south Texas. A branded mule was recognized at Edwards by its former owner. But there was no sign whatever of the people who had been on the trains. A shallow grave, Miranda thought, might well hide its own story of horror. A shallow grave, covered by now with grass.

Miranda said, "What about the raiders, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Walter says it's white men." Mrs. Thompson's fat face was knotted now, and little pink ridges of flesh marked her chin. "He says they murder the emigrants and drive the wagons and livestock in small groups to the settlements, where they bring a good price. It could be that way, child."

Miranda felt the ripple of fear grow till it clutched at her heart with icy fingers. "What can do do about it?"

"Keep watch!" Mrs. Thompson said grimly. "There'll be an armed guard day and night, after we leave Edwards. But Walter wanted me to warn all the women. Keep a gun or knife handy. You never can tell—"

Mrs. Thompson broke off, and the pink ridges on her chin looked hard and red and angry for a moment. Then she smiled.

"Pshaw! No call to scare you, is there? Wait here. I'll fetch Baxter Brownlee."

THE fiddling had begun again as Mrs. Thompson's broad, polka-dotted bulk plowed into the mob of stomping, clowning dancers. Miranda stood with her back against the tree and felt the fear around her heart gradually relax. The picture of raiders on the prairie, of murders and of shallow graves, faded because it was utterly incongruous here among this group of friendly, laughing people. Miranda decided not to think about the raiders for now. Life was too pleasant for that. She watched Mrs. Thompson move through the crowd like a broad ship, leaving a wake of startled dancers off-balance behind her. Miranda grinned.

Mrs. Thompson returned presently with a broad-shouldered, black-coated man in tow. He was blond, with short cropped hair and a small mustache on a trim upper lip. He was breathtakingly handsome, Miranda thought. She felt a curious little ticking sensation deep down inside her somewhere, as she watched the way the man stepped out of the crowd, shoulders erect, slim hips supple, one fine-boned hand stretched forward.

"Miss Miranda Simmons?"

"That's her," Mrs. Thompson said behind Baxter Brownlee. "Ain't she a beaut, Baxter? You keep these wolves off'n her."

Mrs. Thompson gave Miranda a broad, grinning wink and waddled away.

Baxter Brownlee took Miranda's hand in slim, cool fingers. He squeezed the hand. He smiled, showing an even row of sparkling teeth.

"I'm honored," he said. "I had no idea our little train boasted such feminine pulchritude."

"D-didn't you?" Miranda said. She felt faint and giggly. Blood was pounding in her temples. "You mustn't flatter a country girl, Mr. Brownlee."

"Flatter?" Baxter Brownlee lifted his broad shoulders in a Gallic shrug. "I assure you, flattery was not my intent, Miss Simmons. I was simply overwhelmed."

Miranda said, "You overwhelm easy, don't you?" And then she bit her lip as she saw the faint V between his blond eyebrows. But he laughed lightly, and the V went away.

"A girl of spirit! Excellent! Shall we dance?"

Miranda was in something of a daze, and she admitted it to herself as Baxter Brownlee led her to the floor, slipped his arm around her waist. She was fluttery. She felt the pressure of his hand on her back, guiding her gently into a waltz step. His other hand was squeezing her fingers gently.

He led her forward, backward in long, gliding, effortless steps. He seemed to move as part of the music; his movements *were* the music, she thought. She followed his lead without any awareness of doing so. She and Baxter Brownlee were a melting, flowing unity, ebbing and swaying with the music that rose sweetly starward.

It was heavenly, Miranda thought.

Presently the piece ended and she found herself promenading around the floor with her hand in Baxter Brownlee's elbow. Other couples were doing the same. She caught Mrs. Thompson's encouraging glance from the group of married women, and then Baxter Brownlee said:

"You're shy, Miranda, aren't you? Mrs. Thompson told me."

"Oh." Miranda felt her cheeks heat up again. "That—that was Mrs. Thompson's excuse for introducing us."

"Oh-ho!" Baxter Brownlee said, and he grinned at her. "The everlasting plotters, laying snares for the elusive male."

Miranda let her lips quirk a little at the corners. This was familiar ground now. "The more elusive the man is, the more snares women lay. You better come clean, Baxter. It's safest in the long run."

He hugged her hand against his side and laughed, then lifted his shoulders in mock horror. "I give up, ma'am. Don't shoot. Just tell me what you want to know."

"All about you," Miranda said frankly.

He touched his mustache with his free hand and looked at her thoughtfully a minute, his smile fading. He had very blue eyes, she noticed.

"It's simple enough, really," he said gravely. "I am what is known as a young man of means, Miranda. I'm going to California with a group of my friends—mostly for the adventure. Perhaps we'll find gold, perhaps not." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"You don't care if you find gold?" She stopped walking and stared at him wonderingly. "You mean you have so much money you don't need to care for more?"

His smile crinkled the corners of his blue eyes. "I have enough," he said. "After all, money is not the key to happiness, Miranda." He touched her chin with his forefinger. "Now, don't you flirt with me too much, or I'll think you're a gold-digger."

"All right," Miranda said. "You can do the flirting, Baxter." And as the music started, she became very sedate and prim, holding her stomach in, keeping her face unsmiling and sober. But she couldn't keep the twinkle out of her eyes.

She was still being sedate and her eyes were still twinkling two hours later when Baxter Brownlee walked her through dying campfires toward her own wagon. Away from the lantern-lit dance floor, the stars seemed to hang so close overhead she could touch them. She reached her arm upward to try.

"I wish we could," Baxter Brownlee said, seeming to understand the gesture. "I wish we could catch all the stars, Miranda, to hang in your hair."

He looked inexpressibly handsome, Miranda thought dizzily, with the starlight touching the thin bones of his face. Miranda had a deep, aching pain in her breast, as if there were a vacuum there. She understood the pain, and she knew what to do about it.

She stumbled.

Baxter Brownlee said, "Oops," and caught her other arm. Miranda came upright facing Baxter, very close to him, her lips scant inches from his face. Baxter bowed to the inevitable. He grinned and kissed her.

The invisible little blond mustache lay like a tickling line of fire cater-cornered across Miranda's lips. Beneath the mustache was the softness of Baxter Brownlee's own mouth, probing, seeking. Miranda felt ecstasy flood through her. It caught the breath out of her lungs. It left her knees weak and rubbery. She pushed away and

whispered unsteadily, "Oh! Oh, Baxter!"

Baxter Brownlee's face in the starlight looked grave and gentle and strongly masculine. He moved his chin a little, but he did not speak.

"Do—do you think I'm a gold-digger?" Miranda asked weakly.

Baxter Brownlee shook his head. He grinned. "No, Miranda. That stumble was a little—ah—overdone, wasn't it? But you're no gold-digger."

He touched his hat and left her, then, a broad-shouldered, slim-hipped figure striding off through the starlight like a misty Galahad.

IDDILY Miranda climbed into the Conestoga and squeezed past the printing press and undressed in the dark. Her heart was pulsing with a slow, strong, steady beat, sending the hot young blood pumping through her body in an endless, wakeful stream. She knew she would not sleep. She knew she would lie in her cot hugging herself and her new-found hope till morning came. She didn't care.

She put on her nightgown and slipped between the sheets. Her upper lip prickled a little where Baxter's mustache had touched it. Smiling to herself, she laced her fingers behind her head and began to think of a wedding. At Santa Fe, maybe, where she could purchase white things and lace. She wondered dreamily how she would look dressed in a Spanish-style wedding gown, with mantilla and fan. Baxter could wear his black frock coat, she thought. Baxter would be so handsome, so correct. . . .

She sat bold upright in bed. Out of nowhere, a touch of good sense, of realism, nudged her complacency. Eyes widening, she began to consider the possibility that she might not ever love Baxter. It was idiotic, of course, but the thought stayed to annoy her. The idea came unbidden that maybe Baxter was a phony. He had talked of pulchritude, a word nobody but her father used, and then only in editorials. He had said he didn't care about money, when Miranda knew that everybody cared about money, at least a little. Baxter had been almost *too* courteous, *too* protective. Miranda blinked back tears.

Defiantly she pulled back the memory of Baxter's kiss. She remembered the tickling line of fire across her lips. She remembered his hands on her waist. She lay back, smiling again now.

She would marry him, she told herself. She would marry him because he was rich, and because he treated her as a fragile, precious thing.

She began to wonder what it would be like to have a house of her own, a house that would be hers to keep, with never the fear of moving on. Never a worry about the grocery bills, of muddy feet on her floors, or a man who worried more about next week's editorial than about Miranda, herself. . . .

Miranda arose at three in the morning. She dressed in darkness, slipped out of the wagon and built up her campfire, being careful not to awaken her father who snored under a pile of dewy blankets between the big wooden wheels.

All over the encampment, lanterns and fires were coming to life. The gray-topped wagons looked like ghostly sleeping monsters in the erratic light. There was a fresh green earthy smell to the morning. Miranda sliced bacon and got out eggs and a pitcher of milk, humming soundlessly.

When she had the coffeepot on, she went to awaken her father. But he was still snoring. An empty prune-extract bottle lay on the grass beside his head, beaded with dew.

Smiling, Miranda cocked her head sideways and studied her father's unconscious form, feeling a stir of affection in her breast. It was a shame to wake him, she thought. He needed more sleep than she. She stepped up on the wagon tongue and rum-

aged inside till she found a rope, then went off through the wet grass and the darkness to fetch the mules herself.

The mules were inclined to be ornery, but Miranda knew that was merely mule-nature, so she didn't blame them for it. She scratched them behind the ears and led them, two at a time, back to the wagon. She put on the collars and fastened the heavy hames in place and snapped on the harness and the traces. She was threading the lines through the hame rings when her dad sneezed and she heard him rustling around, stamping into his boots. He emerged into her ring of lantern light presently, scratching his tousled hair and yawning.

"I was going to get the critters, Kitten."

"It's all right, Pop," Miranda said cheerfully. "How'd the prune extract set?"

"Not no good," her dad grunted. "I feel like the bottom edge of Hades. Breakfast ready?"

"In a minute." Hurriedly Miranda finished threading in the lines. She draped them around the brake handle and dropped back to the ground and quickly laid bacon into her hot skillet. The camp was alive with lanterns and breakfast fires and shouting people now. Oxen and mules snorted nervously as they were led into place to be harnessed. Somewhere a child was squalling, and a group of dogs suddenly went baying straight through the the middle of the encampment, chasing a white-tailed, bobbing rabbit. Miranda laid out her father's breakfast on a tin plate and went to milk Bridget. Daylight was graying the sky when she tied Bridget to the tail-gate of the wagon and sat down to eat her own meal.

She was washing the last of the dishes when a stir went through the encampment. Away at the far end a deeply masculine voice bellowed, "Stretch 'em out!" Whips popped. Mules and oxen strained forward. Wheels began to turn. Miranda's dad shouted from the wagon seat, "Hurry it up, Kitten. We're starting to roll!"

"Coming, Pop." Miranda gave the last dish a hasty swipe, threw out her dish water in a great sweeping cascade that turned to milky diamonds with the first beams of the rising sun. She dumped the dishes into the pan, shoved it into the wagon, and climbed in after.

"Let's go, Pop," she said gaily. "Let's see if it's true, what they say about California!"

CHAPTER THREE

Way of a Texican

THE long train of gray-topped wagons wound slowly through the muddy forests. Splashing across crystal streams here and there, passing an occasional Choctaw farmhouse or a grassy open space with great spotted cattle grazing. The mules behaved well under her dad's expert guidance. Behind the wagon Bridget trailed placidly, now and then bending her head to snatch at a tempting morsel of grass or wild clover.

Miranda sat on a stool behind her dad, with the type case before her and a composing stick in her hand and the great swaying tarp overhead. Her dad dictated his editorial, then asked, "How many *e*'s we got left, Kitten?"

Miranda laid down her heavy composing stick and counted rapidly, "About thirty, Pop."

"Dang it," he said. "Have I got to write the rest of this paper with only thirty *e*'s?"

"There's that cut of Zachary Taylor," Miranda suggested. "We could use it to take up space."

Her dad grinned at her over his shoulder. His spectacles had slipped down on his nose, and his eyes were bloodshot from the prune extract, but he looked happy, Miranda thought. Somehow she got a deep sense of fulfillment at knowing that her dad was happy.

"Kitten, you're right as usual. I don't know how I'll make out, when you get hitched. You found a man?"

Miranda blushed. "I—met one."

"Who is he?"

Miranda said, "Pop, quit playing innocent. An old newshawk like you knows everything that goes on, five minutes after it happens."

Her dad laughed and pulled a corncob pipe out of his shirt pocket and stuck it between his lips. "How'd it feel when he kissed you?"

"Pretty good," Miranda said. Her cheeks were hot. "He—he's a nice guy, Pop."

Her dad snorted. "He's a phony, Kitten."

"He is not," Miranda said heatedly. "He's just a different type. He's a—a young man of means."

Her dad took the corncob out of his mouth and stared at it aggrievedly, as if it were the cause of a bad taste in his mouth. He spat over the turning wagon wheel.

"Kitten, Baxter Brownlee is a phony, and I'll prove it to you someday. Now, if you want to meet a real, red-blooded American boy . . ." Her dad grinned. "I got him for you. Met him last night."

Miranda raised her eyes to the swaying canvas tarp and groaned. "Oh, no, Pop! What kind of a nut is he?"

"He ain't a nut," her dad said. Then he paused. "Well," he admitted. "Maybe he is a little off his rocker, Kitten. But he's a lovable cuss."

"At least I'll bet he's a cuss," Miranda said.

"You'll meet him tonight. I asked him to drop around."

AFTER supper, while the cook fires were still smoking and the emigrants were lazing about with pipes and final cups of coffee, talking over the day and other days to come, Miranda and her dad unloaded the old printing press. It had been her dad's idea to bring the press along. He had printer's ink in his veins; he couldn't resist the opportunity to publish a traveling newspaper for the wagon train. Since steam power wasn't available, he had bought a pole and shaft from a hay baler. He had tinkered for days rigging the press so that one of the mules could power it.

Her dad slapped the mule on its flank now, starting it on its endless circle. The press began to move. Miranda fed sheets into it. The press made a clanking noise, and after a few minutes a half dozen goggle-eyed children gathered around to stare. Miranda grinned at the children and stacked her freshly smelling sheets, printed now, on a table beside the press. Zachary Taylor's familiar portrait stared solemnly up from the sheets. Miranda winked at Mr. Taylor.

"Thank you, honey," a strange voice said. "I didn't know you cared."

"Huh!" Miranda jerked her head around in surprise. A dark-haired young man in shirt sleeves lay on the grass beside the children. He was smoking a homemade cigarette. He had big brown eyes that were twinkling at her outrageously.

"Why, you—" Miranda said, and her hand slipped sideways and she almost caught her fingers in the press. "Get out of here!"

"Wasn't that wink for me?" the young man asked.

"No," Miranda said. "It was for Zachary Taylor."

She heard her dad's hoarse, "Woah!" and the mule halted and the old press clanked to a stop. Her dad came toward her, his mouth split in a wide grin.

"Kitten, this here's Tex Wister. He's the red-blooded American boy I was telling you about."

Miranda said, "Oh? The one that's off his rocker?" She glared at Tex Wister. The dark-haired man just lay there, puffing on his cigarette. He had a big hat crushed

half under his head, and his shoulders were as broad as Baxter Brownlee's. His grin was infectious, too, Miranda thought.

"What's Zach Taylor got," Tex Wister asked, "that I ain't, honey?"

"For one thing," Miranda snapped. "He knows to stand up when he's introduced to a lady."

"Yeah," Tex Wister said sadly. "I reckon you're right." He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, then yawned, blowing smoke through his nose.

"Tex is kind of lazy," Miranda's dad explained. "But it don't mean nothing. He's a man of spirit."

"I can see that," Miranda said acidly.

"He stands up for his rights," her dad said. "Just like me. He brought three cases of heart-and-lung medicine along."

"Lobelia Number Six," Tex Wister said happily from his prone position. "It mixes fine with the prune extract."

"Pop," Miranda said. "Get this goof out of here."

Her dad looked hurt. "Kitten, I was only thinking of your own happiness. You know that. I invited Tex to take his meals with us. He don't like to cook."

Miranda said angrily, "Pop, if you think I'm going to—" Then she paused, and somehow the humor of it touched her and she laughed. "All right, dang it! I might as well cook for two overgrown boys as one." She turned on Tex Wister. "On your feet, mister. You've got to do a little work for your eats, anyhow. Deliver these papers for me. And collect a nickel for each one. Step to it, now."

TEX WISTER delivered the papers cheerfully, trailing a gang of children after him. Miranda heard his booming voice joshing the nearby emigrants, cajoling the married women, kidding the girls, speaking in deep-toned seriousness of crops and Indians and livestock with the men. She stood looking toward his big figure in the gathering darkness, thinking that he was one of the worthless, joking, lovable kind, like her dad. The kind of man a girl might love, but the kind no sensible woman married.

"He's no phony, Kitten," her dad said in her ear. "Maybe he is a little lazy. They's worse faults."

Miranda turned on her dad, lips tight with determination. "When he gets back, Pop, you tell him to come round first thing in the morning and hitch up the mules. He can milk Bridget, too. If he wants to eat with us he'll work, lazy or not."

She turned on her heel and entered the wagon to wash her face. Pretty soon Baxter Brownlee would come calling. She was sure of that. She didn't aim to let Tex Wister spoil her disposition.

Baxter Brownlee did come, that night and the next and the next. He took her dancing and on long walks around the starlit wagon encampment. When the train reached the Canadian River, he took her moonlight fishing once. They sat on a rock and caught perch and crappie.

As the days slipped past, Miranda's happiness operated like a glowworm. By day it was obscured in the harsh light of ordinary events. At night it shone and glittered. But always, day or night, she was aware of it, a warm glowing light that turned her whole life a rosy hue.

The train crossed the Canadian at North Fork Town, the long line of gray wagons splashing single file into the red sandy water. On the north side of the Canadian now, they were able to shorten the route a little by cutting a chord off the great south-sweeping arc of the river.

Twice a week Miranda and her dad printed their newspaper. Three times her dad became too extravagant with his *e*'s, and Miranda had to resurrect Zachary Taylor. She became almost as familiar with President Taylor's face as with Baxter Brownlee's or Tex Wister's.

Tex Wister didn't make her any trouble,

after that first night. He delivered the newspapers, cared for the mules morning and evening, and tended Bridget. His broad-shouldered figure, with the rolled-up shirt sleeves and the brawny forearms, became something Miranda took for granted, like her frying pan or the printing press. Or at least that's what she told herself. But Tex's intriguing grin annoyed her, and the way the children of the encampment clung to him as he went about his chores.

"Lazy or not," her dad said one evening at sunset, "he's got a way with children and critters. Look there, Kitten."

Reluctantly Miranda followed her dad's gaze. Tex Wister was returning from the spot where he had staked Bridget for the night. He had a frothy bucket of milk in one hand and a two-year-old child in his other arm. Three wide-eyed boys were following Tex, hanging enraptured on his words. Tex was talking.

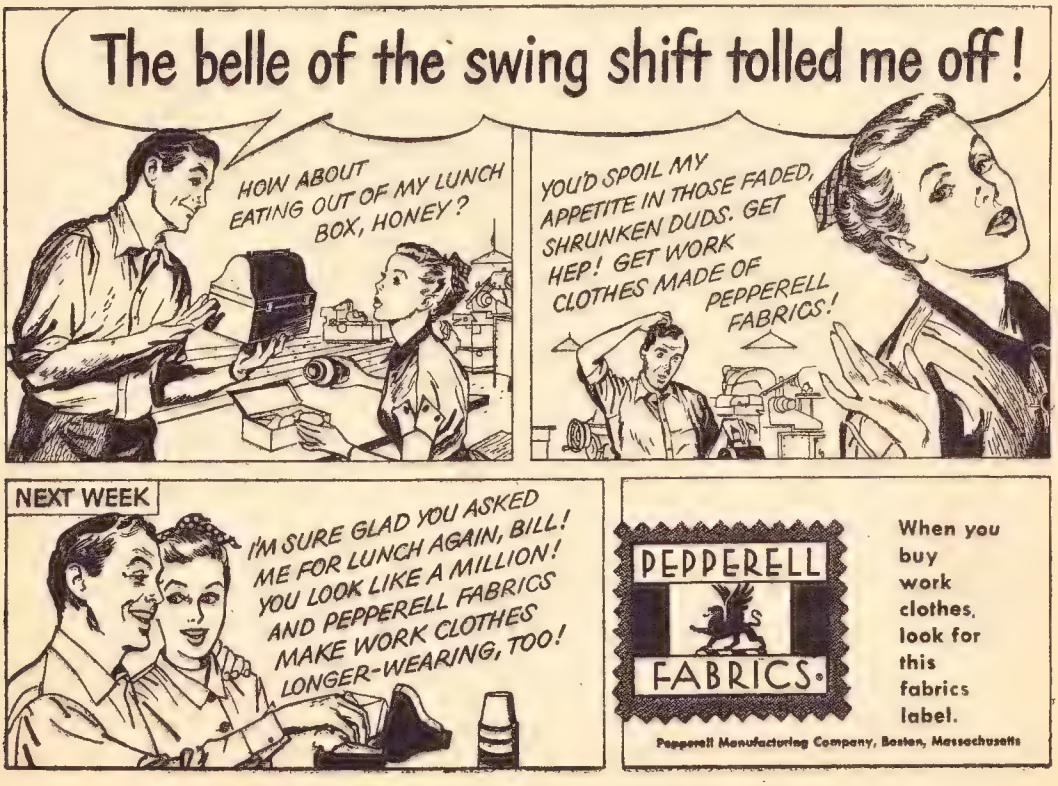
"Talk, talk, talk," Miranda said. "He's got a jaw on him. But a man that hates work, Pop—"

"Even Bridget likes him." Her dad peered at her over his spectacles. "Tex gets more milk than you did, Kitten."

"Phooey," Miranda said. "That old cow's getting daffy, Pop."

"She ain't so daffy," her dad said, grinning. "Did you see what happened yesterday? Your Baxter Brownlee happened to walk behind her, not thinking." Her dad's grin was completely happy. "Bridget gave him a kick that nigh broke his leg."

"I saw it," Miranda said. She turned and went into the wagon, not caring to admit that she'd also seen what followed. Baxter Brownlee had turned savagely on Bridget and broken a stick over her back. It had meant nothing, Miranda was sure. Any man might react thusly under the pain of an unexpected kick. Nevertheless, the little scene between Baxter Brownlee and


The belle of the swing shift tolled me off!
HOW ABOUT EATING OUT OF MY LUNCH BOX, HONEY?
YOU'D SPOIL MY APPETITE IN THOSE FADED, SHRUNKEN DUDS. GET HEP! GET WORK CLOTHES MADE OF PEPPERELL FABRICS!
NEXT WEEK
I'M SURE GLAD YOU ASKED ME FOR LUNCH AGAIN, BILL! YOU LOOK LIKE A MILLION! AND PEPPERELL FABRICS MAKE WORK CLOTHES LONGER-WEARING, TOO!
PEPPERELL
FABRICS
When you buy work clothes, look for this fabrics label.
Pepperell Manufacturing Company, Boston, Massachusetts

Bridget had veiled her glowing happiness for a while, until that night Baxter had kissed her again.

Miranda was aware now that many of her fellow emigrants disapproved of Baxter. She thought she knew why. Baxter was formal; he wore his black frock coat even in the hottest weather. He tended to use words that not many people understood. He stayed close to his own crowd; he had no outside friends except Miranda.

At first Miranda had been a little surprised at Baxter's crowd. They were six bearded, rough-looking men dressed in buckskins or homespun. They carried rifles, and had long wicked knives at their belts. But Baxter had explained that they were buffalo hunters. He had met them on an earlier trip west a year ago, he'd said. He liked them because they lived a free, democratic existence.

Miranda was satisfied with that. She was prepared to like the buffalo hunters, too, only Baxter never introduced them to her. Baxter was close-mouthed about his past. These things disturbed Miranda on occasion. By the time the train reached Edwards Trading Post, she'd reluctantly decided there was some unfathomed secret about Baxter.

From Edwards on, guards were posted about the train day and night. Men grew tight-lipped and wary. Guns became more prominent. Mrs. Thompson gave Miranda a little leather holster she had made, for strapping a knife to her garter. Tex Wister appeared one morning with two pistols on his waist and two belts glistening with cartridges. Miranda had never seen so many cartridges before, nor had she seen pistols like these. They had little revolving cylinders under the barrel.

"A new invention," Tex said. "You stay by me, honey, case of trouble."

But they reached the old abandoned Choteau's Fort without a sign of trouble. They camped there at sunset, preparatory to crossing the Canadian the next day.

That night at the dance, Miranda saw Tex Wister and Mrs. Thompson on the edge of the floor, conferring worriedly. Their eyes followed her as she danced with Baxter. . . .

NEXT morning before daylight, Miranda was on her knees before her fire, blowing the embers to life, when Tex Wister emerged out of the gloom carrying Bridget's milk. The leather in Tex's cartridge belts creaked a little as he walked; his double holsters whispered against his legs. Most of the other emmigrants were still asleep, but here and there the night guards were moving about, gray figures awakening the train for the day. Tex set the milk in the wagon, then hunkered beside her and cuffed back his big hat. He sighed.

"I'm plumb wore out, honey. Milkin' ain't easy."

Miranda sniffed and tossed a half side of bacon to him. "Slice this."

Tex grinned and took the knife and began to slice bacon expertly, his big hands moving with surgeon's skill. His brown eyes watched her with amusement.

"How's the romance coming?" he asked her.

Miranda said, "Don't get personal, bucko. Else I'll have to tell you what your ears remind me of."

His eyes twinkled. "What?"

"An old jackass we used to have." Miranda giggled. "He was lazier'n you, even."

Tex Wister laughed. "Was he good-natured?"

"Yes. He was a lovable old coot. But worthless. Just like you, Tex."

Tex said, "I ain't so worthless. Bet I can kiss better than Baxter Brownlee. That's good for something, ain't it?"

Miranda scowled and picked up a stick of firewood. "Don't go getting ideas! Just because Pop likes you is no reason I have to put up with any freshness."

Tex laid strips of bacon neatly in the frying pan. "Your pa's a mighty good salesman. He talked me into it."

Miranda got to her feet. "Talked you into what?"

"Into marrying you," Tex said calmly. "I didn't want to, at first. But he showed me your good points. How you can cook, keep a good house." Tex's grin was infuriatingly complacent. "I reckon I'll say yes, Miranda."

Miranda said, "Why, you conceited pup!" Then she broke off, because Tex stuck his knife into the slab of bacon and unwound his long frame till he towered over her. The grin was still on his lips, but something in his eyes was very grave. Miranda saw his head shift a little sideways, saw his hands reach for her shoulders.

She swung the stick of firewood.

Tex's left hand moved with incredible speed. It caught the stick and wrenched it from her fingers. Then Miranda felt herself being pulled forward. She felt Tex's big fingers on her shoulder blades. She felt her own body collide bruisingly with his hard, muscled one. And then she felt his lips.

Baxter Brownlee had kissed like a gentleman. Tex Wister was no gentleman, and he didn't kiss like one. He kissed, Miranda thought, like a Texan. His lips were hard and flat. She was conscious of his tousled mop of brown hair falling over his eyes and tickling her cheek. She felt a deep, pounding sense of exultation, of victory, somehow. She clawed at Tex Wister's cheeks, got forefinger and thumb on his ear and pinched, grinding her thumbnail into his flesh.

Tex Wister jerked his head away, but his arms didn't let her go. There was a tiny wisp of blood on his ear that caught light redly from the campfire. He was grinning.

Miranda said, "You brute!" Tears stung her eyes as she tried to wrench away. Through the tears she saw her dad crawl, smiling, from under the wagon. And then, behind Tex, she saw something that made her gasp, that caught her heart in an icy grip.

"All right, Wister," Baxter Brownlee said. "Take off your guns!"

Baxter Brownlee stood to the east. Behind his head, faint blue was beginning to light the sky in pale streaks. Baxter wore his black coat as always; his blond mustache caught some flickering shadows from the fire and looked now like a scar across his face. Behind Baxter were two bearded buffalo hunters, both carrying cocked rifles.

"Take 'em off," Baxter Brownlee said again. "You'll live a little longer."

Miranda felt her heart chugging erratically against her ribs like a faulty engine. She saw her dad's face grow grooved and gaunt as he straightened beside the wagon, and she was aware of a wild, unreasonable panic. Then she looked at Tex Wister, and she understood her fear. For Tex had spun away from her to face Baxter Brownlee and his armed buffalo hunters. Tex's arms hung at his sides, fingers cupped a little, scant inches from his guns. Miranda could see ridges of tense muscle in Tex's forearms.

Tex said quietly, "So you want to play rough?"

Baxter Brownlee grinned, tilting his mustache. Some unrecognizable quality in the grin made Miranda's eyes grow wide, and she realized she was seeing an unknown side of him.

"Rough enough," Baxter said. "Just take a look behind you, folks."

Miranda turned her head, and what she saw made her let out her breath in a low, shaking moan. For in the pale light cast by the lightening sky, she saw a long line of men and women clustered against the river edge. Facing the line were the other four buffalo hunters. The hunters had guns trained on the group by the river.

"We'll go down there," Baxter Brown-

lee said. "Soon as you take off your guns, Wister. Then we'll have a little party."

MIRANDA understood. She saw the whole sickening story in one vision of horror. Baxter Brownlee and his six buffalo hunters were the mysterious white marauders. They had become members of the wagon train for the sole purpose of waylaying it at this point. The gray figures she'd seen awakening the emigrants were actually Baxter's men, herding the unarmed men and women to the river bank. It had all been done very quietly, very efficiently. Now only Miranda, her dad, and Tex Wister were left.

When they had joined the others, Miranda thought, the killing would begin. . . . She felt the blood seep out of her head, leaving her faint and giddy. She heard Tex Wister's voice as in a dream.

"I ain't going to take 'em off, Brownlee."

Baxter Brownlee shook his head, smiling. "I think you will. There are three of us, and you only have two guns. You couldn't reload in time to keep one of us from killing you."

Tex Wister's voice was very steady. "I don't need to reload. This is a new kind of gun. A Colt's six-shooter. Holds six loads." Tex paused, then went on mildly, "I ain't a bad hand with it."

Baxter Brownlee's little blond mustache tipped contemptuously. "Boys," he said to his two buffalo hunters. "Shoot him."

Miranda felt her mind go blank. Her eyes followed what happened, but her mind curiously refused to accept it at all. It was as if she were looking at a meaningless jumble of puppets on a stage. She saw the two buffalo hunters jerk gun butts against shoulders, saw dark eyes squint along rifle sights. She saw Baxter Brownlee pull a cap and ball pistol from a shoulder holster inside his black frock coat. Then she jerked her head back toward Tex.

Tex was on one knee. Miraculously, he had both the strange pistols in his hand. As Miranda watched, the pistols bucked in his hands. Concussion smote her ears. Black powdersmoke drifted past her eyes. Tex kept on firing, two shots at a time. Two, four, six. Then he holstered his guns and got grimly to his feet.

Miranda heard Baxter Brownlee's dying gasp, choked with blood. And from the group of emigrants by the river came a shout as a few of the more daring men turned on the remaining hunters. . . .

After it was over, Miranda had a good cry. All the rest of the morning she cried, while graves were dug, while Baxter Brownlee and his six henchmen were buried. Two of the emigrant men had flesh wounds, but neither was serious.

At noon, when Tex Wister and her dad returned solemnly to the wagon, Miranda was sitting dry-eyed and spent on a blanket. Her eyes were red and swollen, but worse than that was the hard empty spot inside her. Crying had not cured that; she supposed that nothing ever would.

Her dad and Tex Wister eyed her curiously but said nothing. Tex rummaged inside the wagon and brought forth three tin cups and two bottles. He poured something in the cups, handed one to her dad, one to Miranda.

"Lobelia Number Six and prune extract," he said quietly. "Guaranteed to cure what ails you, Miranda."

Miranda looked at Tex's dark, grave face. At her dad, with his gold-rimmed spectacles on the end of his nose and a gentle smile on his gaunt old features.

"Boys," Miranda said, "I've been a danged fool."

Tex Wister shrugged. Her dad sloshed his mixture around in his tin cup and said, "Drink your medicine, Kitten."

Dutifully Miranda drank out of the tin cup. The stuff was sweet and cool and tangy.

(Continued on page 108)

Pin-Up Girl

This gal's through with fencin' around,

Her plans are in shape for spring,

So as soon as an hombre is found—

To finish the limerick in this May contest just make up a last line to rhyme with the second line, write it on a postcard and mail to Pin-Up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this May contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on May 1st, 1952. The judges' decision will be final. See page 108 for the winner of the November contest.

The best of romances can go awry, Sally found—
in a jolting stagecoach . . . and
in a stranger's arms!

THIS STAGE TO PARADISE!

SALLY TRENT shifted uncomfortably on the hard stagecoach seat and straightened her rumpled skirt. Setting her lips primly, she stared out the window. Pastel-tinted hills rose in grotesque buttes and points. A black-tailed jack rabbit bounded through the tangle of mesquite and catsclaw. This cactus-studded country seemed weird and forbidding to Sally—so unlike the green and wooded land of her home.

She shivered a little, and slanted a glance at the man who sat opposite her. His appraising eyes made her a little uneasy. A lady should be indignant, Sally knew—but it was hard to suppress the glow of pleasure his admiring gaze aroused in her.

He had slumped down, his long legs propped on the opposite seat. His flat-crowned black Stetson lay on the seat beside him. As she watched, she noted the contrast between his blond hair, bleached almost silver by the sun, and the deep bronze of his skin. Color mounted to her cheeks when she saw he was still studying her through half-closed eyes. Hastily she turned her attention back to the scenery.

The stagecoach bounced and swayed along a rutted, twisting trail. Sally gripped the edge of the seat, trying to steady herself. Her tiny blue hat, tilted on her brow, threatened to fall off with each jolt. Grimly, Sally shoved it back, only to have it dip again on the next bounce.

The lines around the man's eyes deepened, and his voice verged on laughter. "Excuse me, ma'am. Why don't you take off that hat? And you don't need to keep staring out that window. I won't bite you."

Sally looked haughtily down her tip-tilted nose. "I'm not frightened of you. I just prefer not to talk with strangers."

His eyes sparkled roguishly, and one eyebrow cocked. "I can fix that. I'm Jack Carter, a special agent for Wells Fargo. You're Sally Trent."

Sally's full lips rounded in surprise. "How did you know that?"

Jack's wide mouth quirked. "It's part of my job to know who rides along with Wells Fargo express."

Sally sighed in relief. At least he wasn't a gunman or gambler as she had feared. Her hands moved swiftly to remove her hat pins. Even so, it wasn't proper to get familiar with strangers. She'd have to divert his attention from her.

"I'm on my way to Florence to be married," she said brightly.

"That's a shame, ma'am," Jack drawled. "I was hopin' you were comin' to teach school or something. A girl as pretty as you shouldn't be in any rush about gettin' married. Women are scarce out here. You could have your pick."

Flustered by his words, Sally struggled to maintain her dignity. She shook her

She knew she should pull away from him. . . .

By B. C.
De Pascal

blonde curls loose around her shoulders, and patted the fluff of bangs over her forehead. If only he weren't so attractive, it would be easier to seem aloof. But his words came too smoothly. A girl had to be wary of these soft-talking, hard-living men. Ed had warned her of them.

Sally arched her brows disdainfully. "I'm perfectly satisfied with my choice. I know what Ed is like. The Harveys were our neighbors in St. Louis for years."

Jack smiled wryly. "I was hopin' I could show you around in Florence. Guess your intended wouldn't like that much. Does he know you're coming?"

A tiny frown etched itself between Sally's brows. "Of course he knows I'm coming—though not when I'll arrive."

Jack's crooked grin flashed. "Good. Maybe he won't meet you. Then I can take care of you."

A pulse began to flutter in Sally's throat, and she turned away from the intimacy of his gaze. Sternly, she tried to quell her rising excitement. She mustn't get all trembly, just because a good-looking man seemed to find pleasure in her company. That was being disloyal to Ed.

"He'll meet me," she said coolly. "He's probably meeting every stage."

Jack's eyes moved over her lazily, from the tips of her tiny slippers to the golden curls that clustered on her brow. "I don't blame him," he said softly. "If you were coming to me, I'd meet every stage, too. How long has it been since you've seen him?"

Sally's eyes softened wistfully. "Almost three years. I was just seventeen when he left home."

Jack's brows lifted in surprise. "And he's kept you waiting three years? What's wrong with him?"

Flecks of anger glinted in her deep blue eyes. "He hasn't been able to send for me. He's moved around so much—following the gold strikes. I finally just told him I was coming anyway."

There was a sardonic note in Jack's chuckle. "Maybe I've met him. I've been following the gold strikes, too. But for a different reason. Some men would rather take the gold from Wells Fargo than dig for it. I'm paid to stop them."

"Maybe you have met him," Sally said eagerly. "He's been in Goldfield, Metcalf, Tucson—lots of places."

Sally was disturbed by the change in Jack. His deep-set blue eyes narrowed, and a muscle in his jaw danced. Suddenly he leaned forward and grasped Sally's hand. Sally felt a little tremor go through her at his touch.

There was no humor or mischief in his eyes now. He gazed at her soberly. "I've been all those places—after a certain outfit. Look, ma'am. Take a piece of advice. Think twice before you get married. Three years is a long time. This country can change a man."

Sally's heart was pounding madly, and there was an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. She jerked her hand from his and sank back against the seat, bewildered by his effect on her.

She smiled faintly. "I'm sure you mean well, Mr. Carter. But Ed hasn't changed."

SHE heard the stage driver's raspy voice shouting to the horses, and felt the coach lurch as they rounded a sharp curve. As a wheel sank in a deep rut, it jerked even more violently. Sally gave a startled gasp as she felt herself hurtling across the carriage.

Then strong arms went round her, held her tightly. Her cheek pressed against a soft, wool shirt. The uneven pounding of Jack's heart drummed against her ear. She knew she should pull away from him, but her will seemed to have deserted her. Every instinct clamored to stay in his embrace. Guilt stabbed at her, reminding her of Ed. Reluctantly, she put her hands against Jack's chest and tried to push away.

She lifted her head to find Jack's lips only inches from hers. The flaming intensity of his gaze quickened her breathing. His lips moved slowly along her temple, left a burning trail across her cheek, then found her mouth.

For a moment Sally stiffened, then surrendered to the demanding pressure of his lips. His arms tightened possessively, and her hand crept up to caress the firm line of his jaw. Dimly, she realized his kiss would never leave her memory. But her conscience told her she must break away while she was still able.

With a quavering sigh, she pulled away. She stared at him, confusion and wonder in her wide eyes. A half smile played about his lips, and he looked at her hungrily.

"Still sure you know what you're doing?" he asked huskily.

Sally struggled to free herself, but she was helpless in his powerful arms. Frantically she knew she must get away from him.

She tried to sound indignant. "Let me go! Of course I'm sure."

Jack sobered and bent his head toward hers. "You're lying. You know you want me to kiss you again."

Sally's eyes fluttered closed as she shook her head. "No," she cried, "I don't! Please—" His lips cut her words off abruptly. With a little sigh, her eager lips returned his kiss.

Sally only dimly heard the driver's startled curse, felt the coach slow. When the bouncing and swaying stopped, Jack thrust her aside and put his head out the window. Three men had moved out of the brush along the trail, guns trained on the stagecoach.

The leader motioned to the driver. "Get down," he said gruffly. Then his glance shifted to the passengers. "You get out, too."

Jack's hand moved instinctively toward his holstered gun. Terrified, Sally grabbed his arm. "No, Jack! They'll kill you!"

Jack shrugged wryly. "Too late now. I should have been watching. Might have expected this."

Sally clung to Jack's arm when they got out of the coach. No telling what he might do if she didn't hold on to him. The guard took Jack's gun and prodded them on a few feet.

The leader directed his attention to the driver. "We want the express box. Pronto."

He cursed furiously when told the express box was built into the rear seat. Grumbling, he ordered his helper to unhitch the horses. Together they dragged blasting powder, caps and fuses from the brush.

Sally gasped when she saw them prepare to set off the charge. "Wait! My trunk. It has my trousseau in it. I've got to have it!"

The bandit leader whirled quickly to stare at her. Though a bandana covered the lower part of his face, Sally saw the gleam of fear that flashed in his eyes. "All right." He gestured to his partner. "Toss down the lady's trunk."

The robber clambered to the top of the stagecoach and passed the trunk down. As the leader raised his arms to take it, his coatsleeve pulled up. Sally shuddered when she saw the ugly, jagged scar on his forearm.

Then the fuse was lit, and the men scrambled to safety. With a deep roar, the charge went off. The lid of the express box went flying through the roof while the coach fell to pieces. The bandits swiftly scooped up the treasure. They shouldered the bags of gold and dashed for their waiting horses. As suddenly as they had come, they vanished among the mesquite.

Jack put his arm around Sally's trembling shoulders and drew her close. "Were you scared?"

Sally smiled shakily. "A little. Especially when I thought they'd blow up my trunk. I don't want to lose those beautiful new clothes."

Jack tipped back his head, and laughter

rumbled from his chest. "They take 35,000 dollars in gold, and you worry about a few dresses!"

He shot a look at the dejected driver, and his laughter stopped. Sally noted the grim lines that formed about his mouth and eyes. "*I'd* better worry about that gold," he muttered. "Wells Fargo won't like this—lettin' the gold be stolen right from under me."

He rubbed his jaw, squinting in thought. "I think this is the outfit I've been tryin' to catch up with. That's the way they operate. I've always been one jump behind them. Looks like I'm finally catching up. Hope they don't find out I'm gettin' so close."

The driver ran a knotted hand through his hair. "How we goin' to get to town?"

Jack grinned wryly. "The horses, I guess." He looked questioningly at Sally. "Can you ride bareback?"

Sally shook her head. "Can't we walk? I've never been on a horse."

Jack's grin spread wider. "It'd be a mighty long walk. It's already gettin' dark." Devilish lights gleamed in his blue eyes. "Guess you'll have to ride double with me. I can thank the bandits for that, anyway."

Sally felt a shiver of anticipation run through her. Jack's arms would be around her, holding her close once again. It would be for the last time. When they reached Florence she'd be with Ed. Then would be time enough to force this fascinating stranger from her thoughts. Her spirits soared recklessly, ignoring her nagging conscience. Until then, she intended to savor every moment of this thrilling experience.

Jack lifted her to the back of one of the horses, then swung up behind her. His arms encircled her to hold the improvised reins. Sally gasped in sudden remembrance. "Oh! What about my trunk?"

Jack pulled her back against his broad chest. "Forget that trunk and your wedding—at least for now. If you feel the same when we reach town, I'll see that you get your trunk."

TWILIGHT came swiftly. The tablehand, dipped in blue shadows, merged with the deep purple mountains. The moon rose slowly and hung in the sky like a great lantern, powdering the countryside with silver. Sally sighed deeply, drawing in a breath of the clear, tangy air. Night softened the harsh outlines of the land, to bring out its beauty and enchantment.

Sally had no idea how long they had been jogging along the trail. The soft night sounds drifted on the air, lulling her into a feeling of dreamy contentment. She tried to keep her thoughts on Ed and her approaching marriage, to recall his face and the dreams she had cherished for so long. But her senses seemed attuned only to the compelling man who held her so tenderly. Remembered caresses faded when confronted with the reality of Jack's lips against her temple. Try as she might, she could not make Ed seem more than a shadowy memory.

When they reached the top of a grade, Jack pulled the horse to a stop. Below, Sally saw the occasional wink of a light in the few scattered buildings. She sucked in a sharp breath, puzzled by the strange reluctance she felt on seeing the town.

"Is—that Florence?" she asked falteringly.

"Yes." Jack's deep voice was edged with regret. "I kinda hate to see it. My arms will feel mighty empty when you're gone."

Sally felt tears stinging her eyelids, and she swallowed painfully. There was a knot in her throat that words couldn't get past.

Jack cupped her chin in his big hand and turned her face towards his. He studied her features as if trying to memorize them.

His voice was little more than a whisper. "Sure you won't change your mind? There's still time. I love you, Sally. More than anyone could."

Sally blinked rapidly, her eyes bright with unshed tears. She was promised to Ed—Ed who had waited for her for three

years. She couldn't back out now, hurt him that way. Surely this feeling for Jack was just a temporary attraction. Love couldn't come so swiftly and unexpectedly. It was based on mutual interests and long acquaintance. This was infatuation, a match that flared brightly and quickly died—not the even-burning candle of love. She must obey her mind, not her emotions.

She lowered her eyes, afraid to meet his searching gaze. She knew her eyes would betray the bruising emotions she felt. "No, I can't change my mind now. Ed is waiting for me, with a home and everything. And you aren't in love with me. You're just carried away by the beautiful night."

Jack's eyes narrowed slightly. "If that's how you feel, I might as well say good-by now. We'll be in town in a few minutes."

Before Sally could protest, Jack's mouth swooped down to hers in a quick, searing kiss. Then, wordlessly, he kicked the horse in the ribs, urging it toward town.

Sally looked at the town through misted eyes. There was little to see, only a few mud-colored adobe dwellings. A few tamarisk and mesquite trees tried to relieve its drabness. The only people to be seen were grouped around the entrance to a large, one-story adobe building. Sally noted with surprise that it was big enough to cover a whole block.

"That's the Collingwood House," Jack told her. "That's where Harvey will be if he's in town."

Sally licked her lips nervously. Now that the time had arrived, she found her eagerness to see Ed fading rapidly. What if he had changed, as Jack had hinted? Three years was a long time. She took a deep breath trying to gain composure. No sense worrying about it now, after traveling all this way to marry him. Everything would be all right.

Jack swung down from the horse at the hitch rack. Sally's heart pounded furious-

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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ly when he lifted her down. Just the touch of his hands made her weak and trembly. He lowered her gently and stood there with his hands on her waist. Sally's lips parted slightly, and she gazed up at him with shining eyes.

A man broke away from the crowd and hurried toward them. Sally could hear the hollow echo of his bootheels. A rough hand grasped her arm and whirled her away from Jack. Her eyes widened as she looked up into the unsmiling face.

"Ed!" She recognized him at once. Jet-black hair topped a thin, firmly chiseled face, and black eyes gleamed from below thick brows. The suspicion in those eyes brought a guilty flush to Sally's cheeks. She could see that he had changed, was no longer the harum-scarum boy she had known. His face had matured, somehow hardened. As if to emphasize the change in his way of life, ivory-handled sixguns hung from crossed cartridge belts, swung about his lean hips.

Ed gripped Sally's arms tightly. His thin-lipped mouth was grim. "Sally! Is it really you? I thought you'd never get here! But who is this man? Why aren't you on the stagecoach?"

ALL the strain and mixed-up emotions Sally had held in check for so long gave way. The tears brimming her blue eyes spilled down her cheeks. For a moment she sobbed uncontrollably. Ed's arms went around her, and he pressed her head against his chest.

"What's the matter, darling? Has this man hurt you?" His dark eyes were flinty and hard.

Sally pushed away from him, stifling her sobs. "No, he didn't do anything. He's been wonderful to me. I'm just tired and nervous."

Jack's lean, wide-shouldered figure had grown tense, and his bronzed face paled. Sally looked at him entreatingly, shaking her head. She sighed in relief when she saw him relax and smile crookedly.

There was a sardonic note in his voice. "I don't want to interrupt your reunion. I'll be around town. Look me up if you change your mind."

Sally watched his retreating figure wistfully, noting how his big shoulders rolled smoothly with his gait. Ed was watching him, too—saw him enter the Wells Fargo office. Sally saw that his eyes held a narrow-lidded, wary look. A smile that never reached his eyes flicked his lips.

His voice was almost harsh when he spoke. "I haven't welcomed you properly, have I?" He pulled Sally into his arms, and his lips met hers in a fierce, demanding kiss.

Sally felt as if she were drowning and unable to save herself. She struggled feebly against the savagery of his kiss. After Jack's thrilling and persuasive kisses, Ed's seemed brutal and frightening.

Ed released her, and as if sensing her fright, tried to explain. "I'm sorry if I was a little rough, honey. But it's been so long. Finding you with another man made it worse. Who is he?"

Relief flowed through Sally, melting the ice that had formed around her heart. She should have known how he felt. Jealousy could make a person do strange things.

She laughed shakily. "He was on the stagecoach with me. It was robbed and blown up." She shuddered. "I'll never forget those horrible men."

"Would you recognize them?" Ed asked sharply. "Maybe the sheriff will know who they are."

Sally shook her head. "They were masked. Jack—I mean Mr. Carter—thinks he knows them. He brought me here on one of the stage horses after the robbery."

Sally saw Ed's face whiten, heard the sharply drawn breath. "Did you say Jack Carter? What did you tell him? What do you know about him?"

A puzzled frown furrowed Sally's brow.

"I just told him about your mining and where you'd been. Why? He's a special agent for Wells Fargo. He thought he might have met you."

A twisted smile with no trace of humor flicked his lips. "You're too trusting, darling. He might have been one of the bandits. You shouldn't get too friendly with strangers. I've heard about him. He's a killer and lady's man."

Sally bit her lip, bewildered by the hurt that moved through her in a dark current. That couldn't be true. He was too gentle, too sincere. She let herself be led into the dimly lit lobby of the hotel. She lifted her chin and forced a smile to her lips. She couldn't let Ed see how his words had upset her.

"When are we going to your mine?" Sally asked.

Ed appeared to be deep in thought. He seemed startled at her question. "What? Oh—my mine. Well, I'll tell you, honey. I sold it yesterday. I'm going to buy a ranch."

Sally sucked in her breath in astonishment. "I thought you wrote this was such a wonderful mine. Why did you sell it?"

"Mining is no life for a woman. Too lonely and dirty. I did it for your sake." His voice was vibrant with enthusiasm. "The ranch is quite a distance from here. We'll leave on the first stage in the morning. No sense wasting time here. You'll love it, darling."

"Tomorrow?" Sally said incredulously. "But we can't leave that soon. My trunk is still back there on the trail. And we won't have time to get married."

Ed laughed. "Don't be worried about trifles. Let your trunk stay there. We'll get you new clothes. And as for getting married—the judge would marry us right now."

Sally felt her throat go dry. Things were moving too fast. She couldn't understand it. Ed's apparent nervousness worried her. Jack's words came back to her—don't rush into marriage.

"Surely another day won't matter," she said pleadingly. "I want my trunk. And I want to be married right, not by some judge in the middle of the night."

An annoyed frown drew Ed's thick brows together. It was obvious he was accustomed to giving orders. "We're leaving tomorrow. If you don't want to be married now, it'll have to wait till we get there. Now go on to your room and get some rest. We'll be leaving early."

As if to reassure her, he pulled her into the shadows and put his arms around her. With his fist, he tilted her head back and gazed down at her. A half-smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Smoldering lights burned deep in his dark eyes.

"Don't look so worried, darling. I know what's best."

This time his kiss was warm and tender as he shaped her mouth to his. Sally closed her eyes and tried to return his kiss. This was the reason for three years of waiting. But somehow the joy she had anticipated was missing. Jack's face seemed to float before her, reminding her she couldn't escape him. Perhaps it would be better to leave immediately. She couldn't forget him as long as he was near.

Ed's voice was a husky whisper. "That's more like it. I'd forgotten how sweet your kisses could be. Come on, now. I'll take you to your room."

EARLY next morning, Sally roused when she heard a brisk tapping at her door. Golden hair tumbled over her shoulders as she burrowed deeper in her pillow. "Sally!" Ed called impatiently. "Are you awake? We haven't much time."

Sally rolled over and stretched. Then her blue eyes opened wide as she realized what he had said. Hastily she crawled out of bed and started dressing. "I'll be ready in a minute," she called in answer.

She looked at her blue dress disgustedly, then shrugged her slim shoulders. It was

wrinkled and dirty and smelled like a stable. She wrinkled her short nose as she pulled it on. It would have to do. A fleeting regret for the loss of her trunk stirred in her mind.

Breathlessly she rushed to join Ed. When they walked into the dining room, she found herself searching for a glimpse of Jack's tall, broad-shouldered figure. Her heart stopped for a moment when she saw him across the room. She smiled tremulously and waved her hand in greeting.

Ed's fingers tightened on her arm, and she saw the danger signals flickering in his eyes. His voice was cold with anger. "So he's still hanging around. Don't tell him anything of our plans. Do you understand?"

Again that strange fear of Ed gripped Sally's heart. Carefully, she avoided looking at Jack. "Why shouldn't I tell him?" she asked softly.

Ed laughed harshly. "I know about him. I saw the way he looked at you. Tell him where we're going and he'll probably follow."

Sally patted his hand, and a smile played about her full lips. "Don't be jealous. He isn't interested in me."

Sally's breathing quickened when Jack rose and strode toward them. He paused by their table and smiled warmly at Sally. "Mornin', Miss Sally. Are you feeling better by now?"

Sally was agonizingly aware of the struggle between her heart and the demands of duty. Every instinct cried out to grab Jack and never let him get away. Color flamed in her cheeks.

"Yes, thank you. I'm completely rested now."

Jack's lips quirked in a grin. "Have you sent someone for your trunk?"

Sally bit her lip and shot a questioning glance at Ed. She wasn't sure how he would want her to answer this question.

Ed spoke curtly. "I'll take care of that, Carter. Sally doesn't want any favors from you." He shoved back his chair. "Come on, Sally. We've got to be on our way."

Sally looked at Jack, her eyes shadowed with regret. "Well—good-by, Jack. Maybe we'll see you again some day."

As Ed pulled her hastily out of the room, she cast a last fleeting look at Jack. He was staring after her, a puzzled frown on his face. She saw him hesitate, then start slowly after them.

Sally found herself almost running to keep up with Ed's ground-covering strides. She was out of breath when they rounded the corner and stopped by the waiting stage. She climbed in and sank back against the seat. Through the window, she saw Jack turn the corner, moving a little faster now.

Ed jumped into the stage, yelling to the driver to get started. As he reached to pull the door shut, his coatsleeve pulled back. Sally's eyes widened, and she gasped in fright. There on his forearm was a scar! The same jagged scar she had seen on the arm of the robber.

Ed swung around to face her, his eyes two smoldering slits. He saw the terrified expression on her face, and grabbed her arms, his fingers biting deep into the soft flesh. "What's wrong?" he grated.

Sally shrank away from him in horror. Her voice trembled. "That scar! You're the leader of those robbers!"

As if in a dream she heard the driver yell to the horses, and felt the coach lurch as they started away from town. Her voice rose to a shriek, and she struggled to free herself from Ed's strong grasp.

"No!" she cried. "Let me out of here. I won't go with you!"

"And let you set that Wells Fargo man on my trail? Not a chance. It won't do you any good to scream. No one could hear you. Not even the driver. Anyway, he's one of my men."

He shoved her roughly back against the seat. "Now sit there quietly. I want to be sure Carter isn't following us."

Hope rose in Sally's heart, then died.

Jack had undoubtedly seen them leave. But he'd think she didn't want to see him again. Maybe he'd even think they were going to Ed's mine. Her thought were in a turmoil. She must find some way of escaping. Ed had suddenly become a horrible, hateful stranger. Just the thought of him touching her sent a shudder down her spine.

There was a flicker of insolence in Ed's mocking smile. "Don't look so horrified. Wells Fargo has more money than they need, and I don't have enough. So I take theirs. It's not so awful."

Sally looked at him pleadingly. "Please let me go, Ed. I won't tell anything. I promise."

Flame burned fitfully in Ed's dark eyes. "Let you go—after you came all this way to marry me?" He shook his head. "We'll get married when we get to Globe. I've got friends there who will help me."

Sally's little chin squared determinedly. "I won't marry you—ever!"

A soft chuckle came from Ed's lips. "I told you I have friends there. You'll marry me, all right." His gaze was warm and intimate. "You'll be glad once you get used to the idea. Standards are different out here."

Sally stared out the window, seething inwardly. Her standards wouldn't change. A thief was a thief no matter where he lived. Somehow she would escape.

After a time, she slanted a glance at Ed. As she watched, his eyes closed and his head nodded. Sally tensed alertly. If he went to sleep, she might have a chance.

The horses slowed to a walk as they started up a steep grade. Cautiously, Sally edged toward the door. Then her hand darted out to open it. As it swung outward, she drew a deep breath and dropped to the ground.

She landed hard, but quickly recovered, raced through the dense brush, trying to find concealment. She heard Ed's startled curse, and knew he had missed her. Sobs tore at her throat as she pushed on through the mesquite and greasewood. The brush ripped her clothing, scratched her arms and face. Weariness dragged at her, slowed her steps.

A burst of gunfire sounded. She heard a groan that rose to a scream—then died swiftly. Heedlessly, she struggled on, spurred by the crashing in the brush behind her. Her foot caught on a twisted root and she plunged headlong to the ground.

Sally lay there breathing heavily, unable to get to her feet. Dry, racking sobs shook her slender shoulders. Despairingly she heard the footsteps pounding toward her.

"Sally!" a deep anxious voice called to her. "Where are you?"

Sally's heart skipped a beat. Her mind must be playing tricks on her—that had sounded like Jack! Dazedly she raised her head and looked around.

She saw the tall figure hurrying toward her, and felt a surge of joy. For a moment the sun caught on his blond hair, making it gleam like gold. Then Jack knelt swiftly beside her and gathered her into his arms.

"Sally, honey," he said huskily. "I was afraid I wouldn't get here in time."

Sally looked at him with shining eyes. "How did you know? I was praying you'd come, but I was afraid to hope too much."

Jack frowned. "I had a hunch that Harvey was the man I was hunting, from what you'd told me about him. But I couldn't tell you till I was sure. Then when you acted so strange this morning, I figured Ed was up to something. When I saw you leave with him—I knew I had to stop you. I couldn't let you marry him."

Sally's voice was hesitant. "Did—you kill him?"

Jack grinned. "No. He'll be able to dance at our wedding—but I don't think the sheriff will let him."

Sally's soft lips parted in a happy smile, and she lifted her face eagerly for the kiss she knew was coming. . . .

A KISS FOR THE ENEMY

♥ By A. C. Abbott ♥

TONY BARR still couldn't quite believe her good luck. As she rode down through the heavily timbered country toward her homestead, she looked with awe at the small herd of yearlings Pete Calloway had turned over to her up under the rim. This was the fourth bunch but still just the beginning, she reassured herself for the fifteenth time. Just the beginning of the cow ranch she and her hard-working dad had dreamed of—up until the time he was ruthlessly shot down three months ago.

Neither Tony nor her father had ever cared much for the dark, domineering Pete Calloway, but she had to admit that this idea of a partnership was a good one. Pete had the money to buy cattle; she had the grass to fatten them; and the profits they would split would be the first hard cash that had jingled in Tony Barr's pocket for a long, long time.

She was in the middle of some complicated mental arithmetic—how many pounds on the hoof it took to make how many dollars—when her sorrel horse stopped short, throwing up his head with a wild snort. The next moment a cold, metallic voice broke from the brush directly beside her.

"Get your hands up!"

Tony nearly jumped out of her saddle. Convulsively she grabbed for the horn as she jerked her head around to stare. The dust left by the plodding cattle formed a screen that effectively hid the man who had spoken, but it did not hide the muzzle of the rifle poking out through the bushes. That muzzle was trained on Tony like a baleful eye, and she realized with a spasmodic start what the man had said.

"Hey!" she blurted, letting go of the horn and reaching for the sky with both hands.

"Well, for cat's sake!"

The voice this time was neither cold nor metallic. It was openly, vibrantly startled. For a second the rifle held rigidly steady as if the man behind it had frozen stiff. Then abruptly it disappeared.

Tony lowered her hands and let her breath out with a whoosh of relief, then immediately caught it again as the bushes parted and the owner of the voice stepped into view. Tony had never seen him before, but she was perfectly willing to take a second look.

He was plenty big enough not to get lost in a crowd. He was dressed like any working cowhand—levis, belted gun, faded denim jumper over an equally faded blue shirt—

Tony thought herself a pretty salty cowgirl—
until she tried to trap a glory-hound
and fell for him instead.

"Now then," he said, "maybe you'll have more respect for the law."

♥ ♥ ♥

but the look of astonishment he was wearing was one she had never, in all her seventeen and a half years, seen on a man's face.

For a moment he stared, his brown eyes wide, while Tony stared right back.

Then he said, with a vague gesture of embarrassment, "Women are supposed to have hair."

"I've got hair," Tony told him somewhat blankly and tilted the back of her hat to let some of the black curls spill from under it. "I keep it shoved up under my lid so it'll stay clean."

"Oh. Well, it'd be better to let it get dirty than to get yourself shot. If I hadn't got a good look at your face just as you grabbed for that saddle horn—"

He broke off, hunching his shoulders as if suddenly chilly. Tony herself felt a little prickle of ice running up her backbone, but she had no time in which to contemplate the violence she had so narrowly missed. As the stranger quit speaking, he lifted his right hand, rifle and all, to swipe a sleeve across his jaw. The action shoved his jumper awry; and Tony Barr vibrated to a sudden, numbing shock as she saw the silver badge pinned to his shirt pocket.

Her eyes flashed back to his face in time to see his rueful grin.

"Young lady," he drawled with mild reproval, "when somebody sings out for you to put your hands up, if you don't want to put 'em up, for the love of Mike at least hold 'em still! You've scared me plumb silly."

That left him in exactly the shape Tony was in. She sat frozen to her saddle, her eyes riveted to that strangely pleasing grin while her mind ran head on into the fact that the man behind it was a lawman. And there was only one in the country—that new, glory-hunting sheriff, Steve Martin, who had shot her dad down in cold blood on the miserable excuse that he was "cleaning out" the brakes!

Tony had hated the man in a remote sort of a way, but she had never expected to meet him and she had not harbored any ideas of vengeance in her practical little head. Life in a rough, wild country, she had found, was hard enough without adding to it the burden of personal grievances about which nothing could be done.

Then she saw that the man's grin was petering out under her pop-eyed stare, and an uncertain light was creeping into his brown eyes.

"My name's Martin, miss," he said, touching his hat brim politely. "Steve Martin."

He hesitated, evidently waiting for her to introduce herself, but Tony's voice box was temporarily out of commission. She watched dumbly as Steve turned to glance down through the pines toward the spot where the yearlings had disappeared. Then he looked back at her briefly before striding past her to look at her horse's track.

Tony couldn't help noting how he carried his big body, with an easy grace that hinted of both hardness and strength, and fear closed in on her like a cold fog. Involuntarily her right hand moved to her belt, where the little .38 nestled under cover of her denim jumper.

TEVE gave only a passing inspection to her sorrel's track. Then, shaking his head slightly, he came back to stand at her stirrup, squinting up at her doubtfully. "Where'd you get these cattle, miss?"

Tony's voice came out in a husky whisper. "My partner bought them."

"Oh, yeah? Who is this partner of yours?"

Tony opened her lips to speak, then left them open as a sudden idea put a catch in her breath. If this man would kill her dad just to build up a deadly reputation, he would no doubt lower the boom on Pete just as quickly. And that would be the end of Tony's new-found security.

Steve turned for a swift glance at her back trail, and his next question was more

urgent. "Where's your partner now, miss?"

"Not here," Tony said faintly.

"Where?"

That was some more of Tony's own business. Pete had turned these cattle over to her so that he could ride on to make a deal for another bunch. He would be riding down toward her homestead any time now, too busy driving cattle to keep watch for a rifle-packing lawman even if he knew the lawman was running loose—which of course he didn't.

"Look, miss." Steve took a slow stride forward and lifted his left hand to the fork of her saddle. "I don't want to spook you any worse than I already have, but I've got to have the answers to a few questions. You know, these are Lazy L cattle you're driving, from up on the rim."

"I can read brands," Tony told him, but without much conviction.

"Can you?" he asked with a skeptical grin. "You're not doing a very good job of readin' mine."

"I've already read it," Tony retorted, struggling to keep her breathing somewhere near on schedule. The nearness of that big hand had her shivering in spite of his reassuring words, and his grin bothered her. How, she wondered tightly, could he show her such an easy-going attitude after what he had done?

"Well, then," he said dryly, "if you've read my brand, you know that I only fight women on Sundays and holidays. This bein' Friday we ought to get along fine. Who is this partner of yours, miss?"

"I—won't tell you," Tony said, and closed her teeth with a definite click.

He hesitated, his squint narrowing as he regarded her. "Folks who are behaving themselves," he said finally, "aren't usually afraid of the law."

"My dad was behaving himself," Tony said, a cold anger rising through her fear.

"Your dad?" he echoed, with a puzzled frown.

"Yes, my dad! Clayton Barr. The man that you drygulched three months ago!"

Steve's eyes flew wide open. He caught his breath as if to protest her accusation, but then his lips formed into a soundless "Oh" and he lowered his glance to the ground. "I didn't know Barr had a daughter," he said with constraint.

"Would that have made any difference?" Tony shot at him.

"Maybe not," he said slowly, lifting his head to reveal a queer intent light in his eyes, "but I reckon it's going to make quite a difference now. You won't change your mind about answerin' my questions?"

Tony said rashly, "I wouldn't tell you the shortest way to Hades!"

"In that case," he drawled, suddenly cool, "I'll have to ride home with you." He turned his head to utter a short, sharp whistle, then looked back at Tony with a suspicion of a grin twitching at his lips. "I've been wantin' to meet a girl who knew how to keep her mouth shut. They're kinda scarce."

Tony's heart seemed suddenly jammed crosswise in her windpipe. Her ears registered those last words he spoke, but her feverish mind never got past the ones before. Ride home with her! Ride in to meet Pete, she thought frantically, and probably hand him a hot ticket to eternity!

The cracking of brush jarred her awake, and the next moment a big black horse trotted out of the brush in response to the whistle, his ears pricked forward eagerly. Tony took just one look at that horse and then grabbed for the fork of her saddle with her right hand as she rammed the spurs viciously into her sorrel.

Steve Martin responded quicker than the sorrel did. Before the startled horse could collect himself, Steve made a lunge for him, snatching the reins out of Tony's hand and jerking the horse around so suddenly that Tony nearly went overboard. She caught her balance and, without hesitating for one precious second, made a stab for the gun in her belt.

Steve evidently could see in all directions at once. He caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and dropped his rifle as he spun toward her. Tony jerked desperately at the gun. Its front sight caught in her clothing, and it was just coming free when Steve's left hand clamped over her wrist. At the same time his right arm flashed around her waist, and Tony was dragged from her saddle as the sorrel shied away.

She let go of the gun as she made a spasmodic grab for Steve's shoulder to catch herself. Then her feet touched the ground and she tore into him like a wildcat, her fists beating a heated but ineffectual tattoo against his chest. She heard his startled grunt just a moment before his left arm came across to knock her hands down. Then he jerked her against him, holding her so tight she couldn't even wiggle.

"You," he said evenly, "ain't got the proper respect for the law."

Tony caught her breath, fully intending to tell him what her respect for the law amounted to; but before she could get started, his head came down and Tony Barr found herself being most thoroughly kissed. For a fleeting second she forgot that she was supposed to hate this man, and then it was too late to try to remember anything. The world exploded, leaving nothing except the feel of Steve's hard arms and demanding lips.

When he finally lifted his head, Tony felt as limp as a soggy dishrag. For a moment Steve stared down at her, his brown eyes sparkling like a couple of brand new stars on a dark night. "Now then," he said, with exaggerated solemnity, "maybe you'll behave yourself!"

Then he lifted her and carried her to the sorrel, setting her in the saddle and handing her the reins. The moment his back was turned, Tony got her breath and with it came a blinding fury. The fact that he had kissed her was bad enough. The fact that she had liked it was unbearably worse. Where before Tony's fear had held her more or less numb, now her anger took over and there was nothing numb or undecided about her.

As Steve leaned over to retrieve his rifle, Tony swung her sorrel toward the big black horse and yelled stridently, at the same time grabbing the hat from her head and throwing it at the animal to stampede him. Her intentions were honorable enough, but the results were horribly unexpected.

Her own horse shied violently as the hat sailed past his ears, lunging sideways just as Steve straightened and started to whirl. The sorrel's shoulder struck him in the chest, knocking him backward in a long awkward fall that ended under the spooky black. Tony's scream of warning choked off as she saw one flying hoof strike the man on the side of the head. Then both horses stopped short, and the only movement Tony was aware of was the furious hammering of her own heart.

Steve Martin lay sprawled on his back, his brown hair tousled above his white face, his eyes closed. For what seemed an eternity to Tony, she stared down at him, petrified by the certainty that she had killed him. Then she saw the rise of his chest as he pulled in a slow, heavy breath; and, with a little sob of mingled relief and terror, Tony wheeled her sorrel and hightailed out of there.

TONY found the yearlings scattered and grazing a short distance down the country, and Tony lit into them like the devil himself on a rampage. With swinging rope and high-pitched, frantic yells, she put them on their way and in a matter of seconds was tearing down the country behind them.

She wouldn't have been riding quite so fast if Steve had been chasing her. It was the memory of his still face and limp body that followed her down through the broken country and made her dig in her spurs.

She didn't take the cattle to her homestead, but turned them instead toward a sheltered, grassy pocket several miles from her cabin. There she held them up, rode herd on them until they settled down and started to graze, then turned her sorrel toward home, using every means she knew to kill her trail.

It was not until then that her thoughts managed to catch up with her, and very unpleasant thoughts they were. She still firmly believed that Steve Martin was a cold-blooded murderer who would use any means to build up his reputation as an efficient, hard-hitting law officer. The big ranchers up on the rim were the ones he depended on for support. Backwoods homesteaders like her dad and Pete Calloway were just fodder to be used—or thrown away. Why, he hadn't even bothered to apologize for shooting her dad down without good reason!

He had a lick coming to him, Tony told herself, and she had done exactly the right thing in stopping him cold. She had to warn Pete that the man was looking for him.

Tony found, however, that reminding herself of all this had no effect whatsoever on the yelling of her outraged conscience. True, she hadn't intended to hurt Steve, merely to leave him afoot so that he couldn't follow her home; but Steve wouldn't know that. He would know only that she had knocked him out, then ruthlessly ridden off and left him without even waiting to see how badly he was hurt.

And, for some idiotic reason, it mattered what that sheriff thought of her. Try as she would, she could not forget her first breathless reaction to him. Nor could she forget the delicious, heady effect of his unexpected kiss. If he were anybody in the world but Steve Martin . . .

Tony arrived at her small log cabin in a state of mind that bade fair to cause a nervous breakdown. Pete had not yet come in, and Tony proceeded to wear a dim trail from the three windows to the door and back again. When Pete did arrive on a leg-weary brown horse, Tony was at the corral to meet him, blurting out her story without taking time to separate the climax from the beginning.

"He's looking for you, Pete," she finished, completely out of breath.

"For me?" Pete said sharply. "Did you tell him—"

"I told him I had a partner before I thought," Tony interrupted, "but I didn't tell him who you were."

Pete leaned back against his saddle and reached for tobacco, his dark eyes shuttling narrowly over her face. "I had a hunch he was snoopin' around up there. That's why I turned that little herd over to you while I went on after the one I really wanted."

Tony tried to digest that remark. "But why?" she asked blankly. "Haven't we got a right to buy cattle if we want to?"

"Sure, we got a right to buy 'em," Pete said, his dark face looking about as soft as a chunk of granite. "But don't forget, Tony, those big ranchers would like to run us homesteaders out of the country. They'd frame us in a minute if they got the chance."

"You mean—" Tony waved her hand in a helpless gesture of bewilderment. "You mean they'd sell us cattle and then claim we *stole* 'em?"

"That or anything else they could swing. Martin's workin' for 'em, and he's as crooked as a cow's hind leg. Well, you ought to know. You met him."

"Yeah," Tony said, her voice suddenly faint. "I met him."

She kept on looking at Pete, but she was seeing instead the level gaze that Steve Martin had directed at her, the queer expression that had been in his eyes when she accused him of killing her dad. Those eyes of his, somehow, didn't fit in with the idea of dishonesty, even if she did feel sure he was a killer.

"Where'd you leave the yearlings?" Pete asked abruptly.

"That little grassy place on Deer Creek. I figured he'd trail them down if he—when he got all right."

For some reason Tony's face was hotter than a good brush fire, and Pete's sharp glance didn't cool it off any. But Pete was too busy with his own hard thoughts to spend much time wondering what was the matter with her.

"He'll trail 'em down," he said forcefully, "and he'll stick there and keep an eye on 'em, knowing we'll go back after 'em. Tony, we can get that wolf!"

"Get him?" Tony echoed.

"Yeah. If you go back there by yourself, Martin'll show. I'll get a couple of the boys to help me."

"What boys?" Tony asked blankly.

"Couple fellas I know," Pete answered easily, "that been having the same kind of a rough time you've been havin'. We'll lay low in the brush and when Martin rides out to talk to you—"

Pete finished with an expressive gesture that made Tony feel as if she had just been dunked in an icy river. She tried twice before she could locate her voice and put it to work.

"What—what will you do?"

Again Pete flashed her that sharp glance, but his voice was level enough. "We'll hold him up, put a rope on him and make him listen to our side of the story. I reckon he'll be reasonable."

"You won't hurt him?"

"What the hell do you care?" Pete demanded harshly. "You saw your dad after I packed him in. Shot in the back!"

Tony shivered. She didn't need to be reminded of her dad, nor of Pete's gruesome story of how the murder had been committed. Nor did she need to be reminded that she didn't like the thought of murder now any better than she had then.

"It wouldn't be right, Pete," she said, wanting to sound firm but knowing that her voice shook. "Two wrongs never corrected anything."

"We won't kill him." Pete assured her. "Won't even hurt him, but we'll sure scare him into minding his own damn business. You ride back out there, now. Take it slow so I'll have time to get the boys and get set. And don't forget," he added meaningly, "you're in this just the same as I am and stand to lose just as much if that wolf stays on the prowl."

Without further argument, Pete turned into the corral to rope a fresh horse. For a moment Tony stood watching him, undecided and unaccountably distressed. Then, moving woodenly, she climbed back on her sorrel and jogged off into the timber, her thoughts tagging along behind her like a collection of unlaid ghosts.

IN THE first place, Tony doubted very much that Steve Martin would scare worth a tinker's dam. Something about the proud way he carried his shoulders suggested, rather, that if there were any scaring to be done, he would be on the dispensing end of it.

In the second place, Tony just plain didn't like the idea of being the bait in a trap, even to snare a wolf. She agreed whole-heartedly that the sheriff should be made to listen to their side of the argument, but there should be some way to catch his ear without pinning it plumb back against his head. It just wasn't right, wouldn't have been right even if Steve Martin hadn't been so—so darn handsome!

In spite of Pete's admonition for her to take it slow on the return trip, Tony kept increasing her pace until she was on the verge of setting a record. Her feelings were as mixed up as a trail herd after a bad stampede, but of two things she was quite sure: she had to find out how badly Steve had been hurt in that fall and then she had to apologize for having hurt him at all. Maybe his method of fighting included such low and underhanded tactics, but hers did not.

After that point of honor had been established, the war could continue.

Tony pulled her horse to a dignified walk just before reaching the grassy clearing. The yearlings, she found, had made themselves at home and showed no inclination to pull out. Tony rode well out into the clearing before pulling her horse to a halt, hooking one knee around the saddle horn and assuming an air of what she hoped was complete nonchalance.

As casually as she could, she swiveled her glance around the rim of trees in the hope of catching a glimpse of the man she expected. She saw no one. Swiftly she calculated the miles she had covered, the distance Steve would have had to come. He would have had no trouble following the trail of fifty stampeding yearlings and should have been here by now—unless he had been too badly hurt to get back on his horse.

Again Tony made a careful inspection of the edge of the clearing, with no results. Then her nonchalance shattered, and abruptly she kicked her sorrel into a lope toward the trail she had used in entering this pocket. At the edge of the timber she pulled up, holding the sorrel to a walk and leaning far over his shoulder as she searched for the track of the big black horse. She had covered less than twenty feet when a familiar voice sounded behind her.

"Looking for somebody?"

Tony spun with a gasp. The big black stood motionless beside the trail while Steve leaned easily on the saddle horn.

"Oh!" Tony breathed. Then before she could think, she blurted, "Are you all right?"

Steve nodded shortly. "Except for a bad bruise in the middle of my disposition. Is that what you came tearin' back to find out?"

"Well, no, I— That is—" Tony stammered to a halt, harboring a sudden, sneaking suspicion that he was inwardly laughing at her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"But you sure meant to keep me from going home with you." He straightened abruptly and lifted his reins. Before Tony could even consider retreating, the black horse was beside her and Steve had hold on her bridle. "This time," he said evenly, "I intend to collect some answers instead of just more questions. What's your name, anyhow?"

"Tony," she said weakly.

"Tony?" His eyes slid over her in a critical inspection that brought a hot blush to her face. "Well," he murmured, "the name belongs with that collection of men's duds you're wearin', but it doesn't fit what's inside of 'em a-tall."

His glance as much as the content of his words raised Tony's blood pressure half a notch. "Is that," she demanded, "what *you* came tearing back to find out?"

"Among other things. I sure hate to get licked by a stranger." His lips twitched, then flattened ominously. "Now then, Miss Tony, just what are you trying to hide?"

His sudden, sharp question knocked the wind out of her. "Nothing!"

"Nothing, huh? You always knock a man cold when he asks to ride home with you?"

Tony gaped at him for a full five seconds before she could get her tongue unwrapped. "Listen, you!" she burst out then. "Any man who's stinking enough to kill my dad and come looking for my partner and *then* ask to ride home with me—"

"I didn't," he interrupted, "and not necessarily."

"What kind of an answer is that?"

"I didn't kill your dad, and I'm not necessarily looking for your partner. I'm looking for a gent that rides a pigeon-toed horse. You know one?"

Tony just looked at him, unable to speak.

STEVE grinned. "Maybe," he drawled, "I better go slower and draw a picture or two. I heard two weeks ago that I was supposed to have killed a man down

here in the brakes. As a matter of fact, I never met this Barr gent and I sure didn't know he had a daughter. You kinda knocked me for a loop when you landed all over me a while ago."

Tony located her tongue. "Why didn't you say that this morning?"

"Because I'm looking for the man who did kill your dad. The same man, I reckon, who's been helpin' himself to every cow that strayed more than half a mile from the ranches up on the rim. I didn't want to tip my hand to you for fear you'd tip it to *him*."

"You mean Pe—my partner?" Tony demanded incredulously.

Steve's voice was as level as his gaze. "I don't even know who your partner is, but I'd like to get a look at him."

Tony could see all her dreams going up in smoke right in front of her nose. "You're as crazy as a crosseyed lunatic! My partner's paid for every single head of cattle we've got and—"

"If you're so sure of that, why are you afraid to tell me who he is?"

"Because you—" Tony got just that far and forgot to continue. She had been afraid to tell him for fear he would kill Pete, just as he had her dad, but now he claimed he hadn't killed old Clayton Barr. Tony pulled in a slow breath and let it out in very carefully chosen words. "Is there any particular reason why my partner would lie to me about what happened to Dad?"

"So he's the one told you I killed him, huh? Then I reckon there is a damn good reason, yeah. He made you scared of me so that if I ever started askin' questions about him, you'd clam up and refuse to answer. Just like you did."

"Wait," Tony said.

But Steve Martin wasn't doing any waiting. "What did your dad think of this partner of yours?"

"Not much," Tony admitted.

"I see. No partnership possible as long as Barr was alive, but now my little pet rustler has got some place to take the cattle he steals. Reckon you've got good grass, haven't you?"

"Yes," Tony said, wishing to goodness he'd give her time to think. "But you're just guessing!"

"Sure I'm guessin', but I'll either prove my guesses or take 'em back and start over. Listen, Tony—"

He hesitated over his abrupt use of her first name, but Tony was far too busy to get excited over social formalities.

"At the place where they told me your dad was killed," Steve went on then, "I found a mighty distinctive track of a pigeon-toed horse. You know it hasn't rained in this country for ninety years, and the track was still there. I've found the same track up on the rim where cattle have disappeared. What about your partner's favorite saddle horse? Ever notice his tracks?"

Tony had her eyes glued to her saddle horn but she wasn't seeing it. She was seeing, instead, the track made by the brown horse Pete had ridden today. Pigeon-toed. A distinctive track that a good trailer would never forget—or mistake. But that didn't prove Pete's guilt. There were undoubtedly other pigeon-toed horses in the country, if she could only think of them.

When Steve spoke again, his voice was infinitely gentle. "You're just a kid, and I reckon I shouldn't be raggin' you this way; but, Tony, if you're teamed up with a rustler and a murderer, you darn well better be finding it out! I didn't want to tell you until I found out where you stood in this business, but I—"

He paused, and Tony had to look up. She saw first the grave, almost pained expression in his eyes. Then she saw the three men rising out of the brush not over twenty feet behind him. Tony, in the stress of the past few minutes, had completely forgotten that Pete was coming. Now her memory was jolted and then immediately obscured by the realization that it wasn't a rope Pete had in his hands. It was a rifle,

and it was steadying on the broad back of the sheriff.

Tony didn't have time to think. She just acted. She leaned over the saddle horn and jerked the reins tight against the sorrel's neck as she spurred him, literally lifting him into a blind lunge straight toward Steve's black horse.

The black staggered under the impact, and from then on things happened too fast for Tony. She felt a terrible, rending pain in her left arm seemingly at the same time that she heard the crash of a rifle. The next moment her saddle was snaked from under her, and she was falling through what seemed like a solid wall of gunfire.

She lit hard on her side and tried to roll to her hands and knees, but her left arm wouldn't hold her up and she couldn't get her head off the ground. It was hammering wildly, and somewhere inside of it a thought was galloping around like a locoed bronc. She had to help Steve.

She was still struggling when hands grabbed her and flopped her over. She could hear someone calling to her, and the voice had a desperate ring that was somehow very pleasant to hear. Then she felt the sleeve ripped away from her left arm, and she managed to get her bleary eyes focussed. When she saw that it was Steve who was binding her arm, relief turned her momentarily weak.

"You'll be all right, Tony," he said hastily, "but my gosh, darlin'!"

Tony heard only the last word. "Huh?"

"Yeah. Huh!" he retorted and stopped right in the middle of the bandaging to put a kiss on the end of her nose. "I started to tell you awhile ago—I planted that herd you were driving, Tony, and my rustler on the pigeon-toed horse was the gent who took 'em. When I found out he was maybe your partner, I didn't know what to think."

"I'm still not sure," Tony said honestly, her eyes on his lips.

Then she became aware suddenly that he had finished the bandaging and was slipping one arm under her shoulders. Those lips were getting closer and closer, and Tony still couldn't get her eyes off them. She saw them moving and had to force herself to listen to the words they uttered.

"From here on," Steve was saying firmly, "I'll do the thinkin' for this outfit. You're inclined to get a little mixed up, you know."

MEN IN THEM THAR HILLS!

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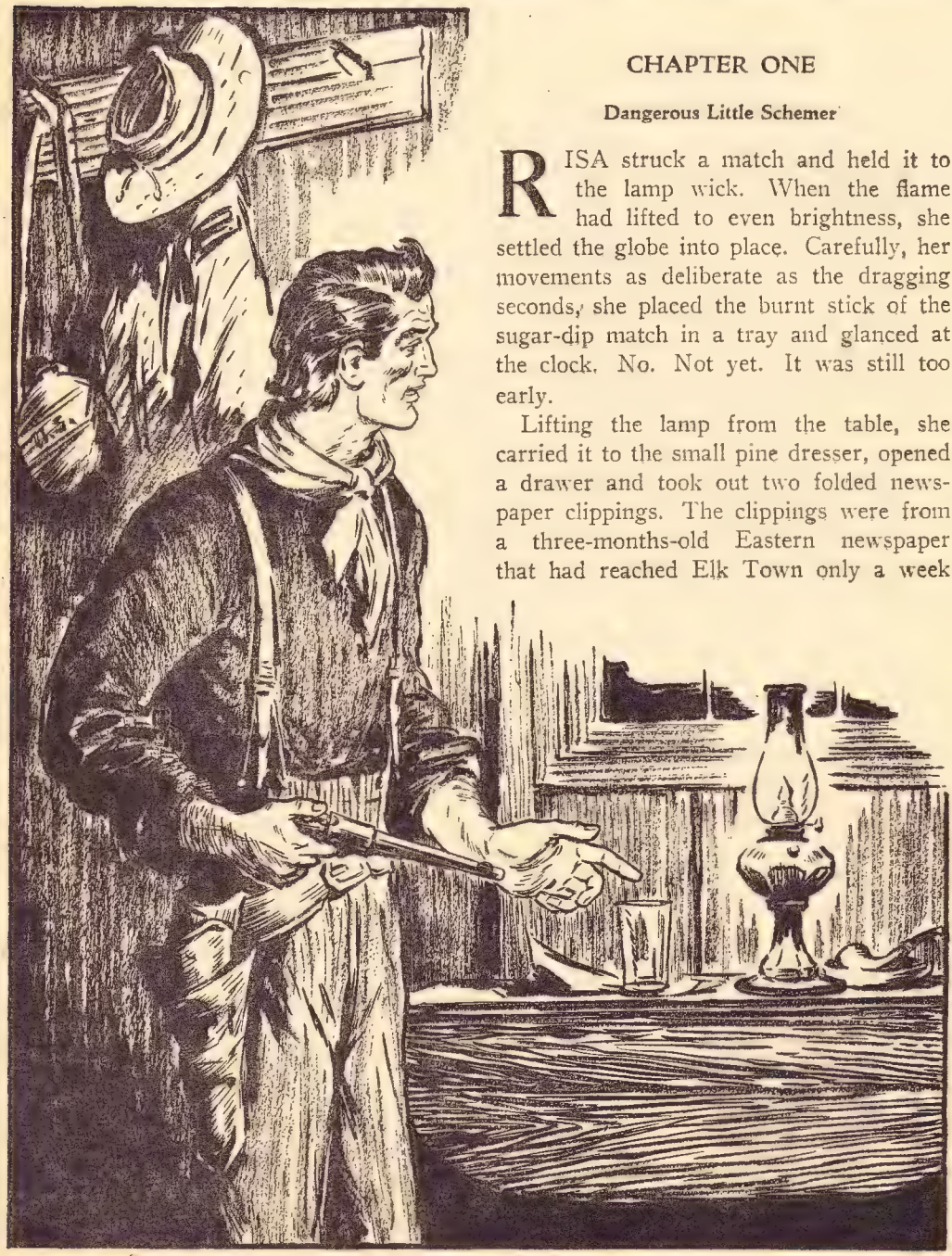


CHAPTER ONE

Dangerous Little Schemer

RISA struck a match and held it to the lamp wick. When the flame had lifted to even brightness, she settled the globe into place. Carefully, her movements as deliberate as the dragging seconds, she placed the burnt stick of the sugar-dip match in a tray and glanced at the clock. No. Not yet. It was still too early.

Lifting the lamp from the table, she carried it to the small pine dresser, opened a drawer and took out two folded newspaper clippings. The clippings were from a three-months-old Eastern newspaper that had reached Elk Town only a week

CALL TO ARMS

By Marian O'Hearn

Daring Risa had the ammunition to enslave a whole army— but she couldn't even dent the bold captain's armor.

before. Smiling faintly, she returned one of them to the drawer. She was no longer interested in the piece about Mrs. Thaddeus Cullen and the difficulties a general's wife encounters on the frontier. But she reread the second item:

New York society is disappointed at the news that Captain William Jessup will remain at Fort Wayne for at least another two years. Obviously, Captain Jessup, who inherited the entire estate of his millionaire father, the late Cyrus K. Jessup, finds army life to his liking.

Risa's lips stirred again and she shook her head. Army life! Sun, dust, heat and emptiness. . . .

Then her breath caught. A bugle had begun to sound, an imperative, terrifying call cutting through the night. Was it an

"You!" he said. "What are you doing here at the fort—and prowling around my quarters at this time of night?"

alarm? A warning of an Indian attack?

Her fear was a choking wedge in her throat. Indians had struck at the fort within the past month, and had left dead and wounded soldiers behind them when they were driven off. Even worse, a roving band of white outlaws called the Prairie Riders had moved into a new hideout in the hills above the fort. The riders were even more ruthless than the Indians—raiding isolated ranches, driving off cattle, setting fire to the spreads they had looted. It was a vicious gang, and it continued to elude the grimly pursuing troopers.

Risa closed her eyes and tried not to think of what might be happening beyond the fort walls, of the primitive violence of the surrounding wilderness. The bugle had stopped and everything was quiet. . . . Then, somewhere on the other side of the garrison, a man laughed. The muffled, comforting sound revived her. She had only imagined the stillness. The choking wedge left her throat and she could breathe again. Could realize that her own terror might defeat her. But she must not let it.

Turning back to the dresser, she took off the dark, demurely collared dress she had worn at supper and got into a thin, soft green frock. It was the kind of gown designed for special, candle-lit evenings at home, and it emphasized the lines of her body and was sheer enough to reveal the dim glow of white shoulders.

When the tightly fitting bodice was adjusted, she brushed her hair and touched her thoat and brows with perfume.

She was ready for the meeting with Captain Bill Jessup—the reason for her presence in Fort Wayne. He did not dream it, but her one purpose in coming here was to marry him—and as quickly as possible. If she could play this scene right tonight. . . .

A frown creased the flesh between her scented brows. If only this could have been their first meeting, instead of the second; if only she didn't have to remember how he had turned away from her with hard knowledge in his eyes!

But she would simply make him forget all thought of that first encounter. He had been on the almost-womanless frontier for a long time. And she was beautiful.

Risa was fully capable of judging her own beauty—she had to be, to know its value as a weapon. Her only weapon. She knew that she possessed a special kind of femininity, one that was neither flaunting nor challenging but nevertheless inescapable. Her long eyes were melted black mahogany, her hair the incredible pastel yellow of palo verde blossoms, her mouth fire-scarlet. Tonight, she was going to use that weapon of beauty on Bill Jessup.

HE turned down the lamp wick and went to the window that overlooked the parade grounds. Opposite was Bachelor's Row, a line of cabins occupied by the unmarried officers. Bill Jessup's quarters were in the cabin second from the end, where a shaded light showed above the entrance. He was at home.

Drawing the window curtains into place, she opened the door and paused to listen to the hum of voices which came from the living room. General Thaddeus Cullen and his wife were entertaining the guest who had arrived in the afternoon. Risa, as governess, had had a schoolroom supper with the children and had not met him yet. "He's quite an important visitor," Mrs. Cullen had explained. "Lord David Montebrook, who's come over from England to spend several months on the frontier."

Risa shut the bedroom door very carefully and walked silently down the hall to the kitchen. Then she was through the door and safely out of the house.

The night was a thick black curtain enfolding her, but she moved through it unhesitatingly, making a wide circle around

the house and the troopers stationed at the front entrance. Walking steadily and confidently, her long skirts held well above the ground, she turned into the path which ran along the edge of Bachelor's Row.

The Cullen children had been eager to supply her with detailed information concerning everything in the fort, and from them she had learned where Bill Jessup lived. Now she saw that the front window of his cabin was edged with light. She paused a moment, smoothing her hair. The right entrance was so important. . . .

Then she reached out and carefully touched the doorknob. She turned it even more delicately. The door was unlocked! Perhaps on a military post, locks were superfluous.

Excitement leaped up in her. A hard, triumphant excitement. Softly, she pushed the door inward—and halted with a gasp.

She was looking down the barrel of a leveled gun. Holding it was a tall man whose look of surprise instantly turned into an angry frown. Something like panic fleeted through Risa, but she drew a quick breath and laughed softly.

"Hello, Captain Jessup," she murmured.

She heard the faint sound of his breath before he said, "*You!* What are you doing here at the fort—and prowling around my quarters at this time of night?"

He had remembered her instantly. And the memory had brought hard knowingness into his eyes.

"It's a complicated story," she said softly. He was still encased in armor. An armor of remoteness. And yes, he *was* almost ugly. Darkly weathered skin taut over the cheek bones, a faintly thrusting chin and a prominent, high-bridged nose. He was big, and the lines of his body were clean and strong.

He put away his gun and motioned for her to sit down. She chose the chair nearest the lamp: the chair she knew he had been occupying. He pulled out a straight-backed chair for himself. "All right," he said. "Let's have it. What's this complicated story of yours?"

"Well . . ." Her voice faltered. Warmth was stinging her cheeks and she was full

of uneasiness. "When did we meet in Elk Town? How long ago?"

"Almost four weeks ago," Jessup said. "You told me you were General Cullen's daughter and said you had slipped away from the fort just as a lark, to go to Elk Town. Then, you told me, just as you reached Elk Town one of the carriage axles broke. You'd forgotten your purse and you didn't know how you'd manage to get home and—"

"You needn't repeat the rest of it." Fighting back the uneasiness, she tilted her chin in a gesture of determined candor. She was afraid she had made a mistake about Jessup and the effects of the lonely frontier. And she had been completely wrong in thinking him almost ugly; there was no suggestion of ugliness about this man. Instead, there was something disconcertingly close to male magnificence. Not only in the hazel eyes but in the controlled mouth and the poise of his head. And especially in his composure, the relaxed strength of his body. His poise was rapidly unnerving her.

She went on talking because she had to. "When I met you in Elk Town that day, in the lobby of the Mansion House, I thought anything would be better than telling the truth. I didn't want you to think—" She broke off and tried, almost fiercely, to see past the greenish surface of his eyes. Finally, with a quick gesture that brushed aside the explanation she had almost made, she said, "You said you'd just come from Crown Rock by stage, and I was sure you'd just arrived in this part of the territory. How could I know you were stationed at Fort Wayne and had merely been making a brief trip to Crown Rock?"

He smiled mockingly. "So you believed I was an officer on his way to a new assignment, a stranger who couldn't know anything of Elk Town, the army post—or the kind of beautiful girls who drift about the frontier."

IRE whipped into her cheeks again. "I wasn't *drifting* about the frontier. I'm an actress, and I was with a road company called the New York Gayeties that was making a tour of the territory."

Jessup's mouth stirred and a fleeting grin touched the corners of his lips. "Then you knew exactly how to trip right in front of me—and so prettily, too. I was the sucker who'd caught a lovely girl in his arms to keep her from falling, and it wasn't supposed to occur to him until later that she had some definite purpose—such as cash. Or that maybe she might trip helplessly every time a new prospect appeared."

Risa straightened and looked directly into his eyes. "You're mistaken, Captain. But there's nothing to be gained by going into that. Besides, I can't understand why, if you knew I was lying, you still insisted on lending me enough money to pay for the supposed carriage repairs?"

His mouth stirred again, but into a brief, thin smile that added to his armed remoteness. "Maybe just because a few minutes conversation with a girl like you is priceless after a man's been out here any length of time. How about going back to the questions you haven't answered. How did you get into Fort Wayne? And why?"

Her lashes veiled her mahogany eyes. "I'll have to start at the beginning. In the first place, I wasn't looking for prospects, as you call them, that day. I was desperate and—it just happened. The road company of the New York Gayeties had started out on a shoestring. No one had considered how few sizable towns there were in the territory, or the cost of transportation. The company began to go broke, and then one night the manager took all the cash he could find and disappeared. We were stranded. I owed a hotel bill and didn't have money to buy food."

"I see." His eyes were deeper, harder,

greener. "You should have asked me for a much larger sum. I'd have given it to you. Go on, please. That was four weeks ago, and you not only managed to pay living expenses but the cost of the trip from Elk Town to Fort Wayne."

"Yes," she said quietly. But anger was igniting in her brain. If the Eastern newspapers had reached Elk Town a month earlier, she would have known that Captain Jessup was more than merely another romantic young officer with nice manners.

She said, "I learned that General Cullen's wife was looking for a governess for her two little boys, came to Fort Wayne and applied for the job. She hired me."

"What?" The word was a pistol-crack. Jessup's calm was shattered, and his eyes were like amber flame. "You're here to look after Tad and Hank Cullen—to teach them?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

He swung up to his feet, looked down at her, and dropped back into the chair. The armor was slipping into place again, masking his face. "I don't know how you managed such a trick," he said, and his voice was very even, "but it won't work. Not any longer. I can't let the general and his wife be fooled by a—a—"

"A drifter?" she murmured.

"Yes. Thaddeus Cullen's not only my commanding officer but a very good friend. He certainly wouldn't have hired you if you'd told the truth. You must have made him believe you were—qualified for such a job."

She forced back her anger. "I am qualified. In fact I'm much better educated than the majority of governesses. I'm a graduate of the Eastmoreland Girl's Preparatory School and Miss Fullbright's Seminary for Young Ladies."

Amber-bright sparks flickered across the surface of his eyes. "Sorry, but I doubt that."

Her lips curved into a wry smile. "You don't believe a thing that I've told you."

"I can't. Any more than I could believe you were General Cullen's daughter. It was unfortunate that I knew the general's only children were boys—two very small boys. And even if you've sufficient schooling, a governess needs certain other—qualities."

Risa's smile grew assured and challenging. "You could be entirely mistaken about me. But that doesn't matter. Because in any case I'm not leaving, Captain Jessup."

"I'm afraid you'll have to."

"Wrong again." Her voice warmed as if laughter were suddenly running through it. "And you can't do anything about it—for this reason: At any moment I choose, I can burst out of your quarters, screaming. Soldiers will charge to the rescue from all over the fort, and you'll probably face court martial. Your friendship with General Cullen won't keep him from being furious when he learns that an unsuspecting girl—the nice young lady who has just become governess to his children—was lured into an officer's bachelor quarters and forced to call for help."

JESSUP'S hazel eyes studied her and then he too smiled. Briefly and tightly. "You seem to have figured everything out to the last detail."

"I have. Even to considering the fact that, no matter what is agreed upon tonight, you might be the kind of man who'd feel that his obligation to General Cullen forced him to act. In that case, I'll explain—very unhappily—to Mrs. Cullen that you got me to come to your quarters by saying she and the general promised to call, which made everything seem quite proper."

"She wouldn't believe you. You know they're entertaining Montebrook, that Englishman who intends to hang around the fort until he's finished whatever mean little job he's been sent to do."

Risa's lashes flicked away from her eyes.

"Mean little job?" she repeated, momentarily forgetting her own desperate necessity.

He smiled again, even more tightly. "Why do you suppose we're having so much trouble with the Indians? And how is the gang called the Prairie Riders—a gang so big it includes more outlaws than we have troopers in this garrison—getting guns, equipment and money?"

"But—" Her voice was startled. "Why should the British—?"

"Do such unsporting things?" he cut in with savage mimicry. "Because this is a great, rich continent—too rich for their sporting rules to apply. They want it, or a good chunk of it, and—" He broke off. "Let's get back to you. If I don't keep still about your past, you claim you'll convince Mrs. Cullen that I'm unfit to be an officer. What makes you think they'll accept your word against mine?"

Risa smiled, "I'll be able to give a complete, detailed description of this room. And I'll have other proof, too. Such as this." Her fingers closed on the edge of her sleeve and tore the thin material, leaving her arm bare almost to the shoulder. "You tried to kiss me and I fought so hard my dress was ripped."

Jessup's glance, the green of unsunned arctic ice, struck at her; then suddenly he laughed. "You'd win, all right," he said and got to his feet. "A beautiful woman can do anything, if she's ruthless enough. That's what puzzles me. Why should a girl like you ever be stranded and penniless? Or have to borrow money? Or lie about herself?"

Risa hesitated. Hidden behind his taut dark face was his invisible armor. And she had to break through it, had to reach him. "Maybe your questions are proof of how wrong you are. Maybe I'm just what I said."

He looked down at her. "One statement could be true—you are, or were, an actress. Everything about you has a theatrical ring, even your name. Risa Storm sounds like a stage label."

"It is." Laughter threaded through her voice again. "I was christened Clarissa Sanders."

Abruptly, his eyes changed and, as the chill left them, became the shimmering amber of flame. "Now, let's get everything straight. You came here tonight merely to arrange our—agreement: that I'm to keep still concerning anything I may know or suspect about the Cullen's new governess. That was your only reason for coming?"

"Yes." She rose and smiled up at him. "Good night, Captain Jessup." She moved toward the door, the long, soft green gown rustling faintly, her shoulders glowing through the sheer silk.

"We won't say good night just yet, ma'am."

The low words spun her around. His eyes were a brighter, more flaming amber. "We've settled the business of your remaining in Fort Wayne, but certain other matters haven't been discussed."

"Such as?"

He grinned but his mouth was hard. As hard as the armor he had built around himself. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he said softly. "We're alone in an army cabin on the frontier, and a little while ago I tried to kiss you—behaved so roughly that I tore the sleeve of your dress. It's a story anyone would believe. Even I believe it. So . . ." He moved toward her.

"Good night, Captain," she said swiftly, but before she could move away, his hands closed on her wrists.

He pulled her into his arms and imprisoned her there while he slowly bent his head. His mouth, as it took hers, was cool and edged, and the kiss burned her lips the way ice can burn. He despised her. The kiss was deliberately contemptuous. And he, his inner self, was still remote, barricaded against her. Yet her

lashes dropped as she thought of his eyes and the poise of his head. . . .

His lips left hers. "Now if you tell your story, it'll be the truth—and if I'm brought up on charges of ungentlemanly conduct, I'll figure it was worth it."

Risa's chin tilted and her fire-scarlet lips broke apart. "Was it?" she whispered. "Was it worth it?" Already he wanted to forget everything but her nearness and the touch of her mouth. If he took her back into his arms, maybe . . .

"Yes—in a way you wouldn't understand." He strode past her and opened the door. "Good night, ma'am."

CHAPTER TWO

Two Targets for Risa

RISA watched five-year-old Tad Cullen screw up his face and manfully try to copy the ABC's she'd written on a slate for him. "That's good, Tad—that's very good," she told him. "Now try the *B*. See, Hank is writing a whole sentence." She stopped. Hank, two years Tad's senior, was laboring mightily at a small blackboard to erase an *S* he'd printed backward.

The schoolroom door creaked open. "Miss Storm," Mrs. Cullen said, "may I interrupt a moment?"

Before Risa could answer, the general's wife stepped into the room. She was a very plump woman with very pink cheeks, dressed in a ruffled pink dress. "My dear," she said, "it's so wonderful to have you with us. I can see you've had marvelous training. But I want you to meet our guest." She turned toward the man who had followed her into the schoolroom. "This is Lord David Montebrook."

The girl nodded demurely and murmured: "Lord Montebrook." But the pulses in her wrists lifted into a high, hard stroke and her brain whirled. Montebrook was very English, obviously well-bred, just as obviously correct in the British manner. Slim, tall and fair, dressed in smartly casual clothes. As his blue eyes met hers, a wild drum-beat seemed to crash within her.

"I'm honored, ma'am." His voice was light-timbered, yet deep. "Mrs. Cullen has told me you came out here, alone, after hearing she was without a governess for the children. Imagine a girl making the trip all the way from the East to the frontier!"

"It is amazing, isn't it?" Mrs. Cullen said. "A friend of mine—Daisy Fielding—happened to tell Miss Storm of a letter I'd written her complaining that I couldn't keep a governess because the junior officers married them as fast as they arrived."

"Yes, indeed," Montebrook agreed, but his smile was for Risa, and there was a strange insistence in his eyes. "I'd like to hear about your journey. Since it's almost dinner time, perhaps you'll describe it to me at the table."

The girl's lips curved without losing their demureness. "I'm to have dinner with the children."

"Not today!" Mrs. Cullen cried. "You simply must dine with us. One of the Indian maids can look after the boys for an hour or two."

Risa's smiled. "Of course, if you wish."

"I'll expect you in ten minutes, then." Mrs. Cullen moved to the door. Montebrook, following her, paused to glance back at Risa. His eyes were even more insistent. Or did they hold a certain kind of recognition?

Ten minutes later, when she entered the living room, she avoided his gaze and turned, at once, to acknowledge General Cullen's greeting. The general was thin, brown and tired-eyed, but there was friendliness and genuine warmth in his face. When Mrs. Cullen signaled, with her pink smile, that they were to go in to dinner, he gravely offered Risa his arm.

The meal seemed exhaustingly lengthy and Mrs. Cullen talked constantly. Finally the general, with a brief apology, pushed back his chair and left.

"Much as I'm enjoying this, I must get back to the children," Risa said, then. "If I may?"

"Certainly, my dear."

Montebrook also rose. "I'll go along with you." Striding after her he murmured, "Let's go outside, on the porch, for just a minute. A breath or two of air will do us good."

There was blue fire behind his eyes. The kind of blue fire which could be more dangerous than intense white flame. It was reaching for her, trying to make her acknowledge him.

INSTEAD of answering, she turned through the front door onto the porch and walked slowly across it. Montebrook, beside her, asked, "Do you really intend to stay here at the fort? That is, for any length of time?"

She looked up at him. "Yes."

"I can't believe it—" His voice cut off as a roaring, pounding noise filled the air. Men were shouting and whips were cracking. Cattle were charging across the compound. Dozens, possibly hundreds of animals, were storming toward the north wall of the fort.

"What is it?" Risa struggled to keep her voice steady. "What's happened?" Terror had come to life again. Terror of the savage violence of the wilderness.

"Don't know. Nothing serious, I'd guess. Looks as if soldiers are herding the cattle. Guard!" he called sharply, to one of the sentries below.

The trooper grinned and ran up the steps. "We're just moving the herd from the pasture inside the fort to one outside, sir. Grass is thinning out."

David Montebrook smiled, apologetically, at the girl. "I shouldn't have needed an explanation." But his glance flicked back to the cattle, moved past them to the gates that were being opened to let the herd through. "I am surprised, though, that they're being taken outside. In fact, I'm surprised at a good many things about Fort Wayne."

Risa said, "The whole place is amazing. Perhaps it seems strange to everyone."

"I can't understand," Montebrook went on as if he had not heard her, "the reason for such a light garrison. There's not even a full regiment stationed here."

His eyes were no longer intense. Or even blue. They had paled to thin gray. And the lines of his face had sharpened. "Is it temporary? Are more soldiers on their way to the fort?"

"I don't know. But a detachment of the troopers are away on practice maneuvers."

Hank Cullen had told her that, explaining: "Practice maneuvers means they're hunting outlaws or Indians. Sometimes it's called a scouting expedition."

Montebrook chuckled. "How odd. Would you like to walk down to the gates?"

"No, thanks. The children are waiting for me."

"Will I see you later on? Tonight?"

She shook her head. His face was changing again, his mouth becoming full and heavy-cornered. "No, I—"

Someone was coming up the steps. Someone who moved lightly and surely. Bill Jessup. She knew that before she turned and met his green-sheened glance. Even in uniform there was smooth ease about his big body.

He flicked a salute at Montebrook. "I'm looking for General Cullen. Is he here?"

"Hello, Jessup. Still on duty? Seems to me you were on the job when we met at dawn. No, the general left half an hour ago."

"Thanks." Jessup's glance slid over to the girl.

Dave Montebrook said, "You've met the captain, haven't you, Miss Storm?"

As Risa hesitated, Bill Jessup said: "A pleasure, ma'am." Saluting crisply, he nodded at the other man and turned back down the steps.

Montebrook smiled. "Stand-offish, isn't he?" he murmured. "But quite a soldier, I understand. We were talking about tonight before he showed up. Will I see you?"

"Yes." And her fire-scarlet lips curved into brilliance.

ISA, in filmy black, her dark brows and fair hair lightly scented, reached the porch a little after eight. Night was settling and a thin, twisted slice of moon showed in the darkened sky.

Montebrook stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the porch. "Hello. I was beginning to think you might have changed your mind." He touched her arm, and his hand felt too dry and warm.

She moved a little away from him. "Let's have a walk."

"That's about all there is to do." As they went down the steps, his hand closed on her arm. "I should think being in here, inside these walls, would make people feel like prisoners."

"I suppose they become so accustomed to it that it seems natural."

"I couldn't do it, not even for a short time. And I wouldn't miss exploring the country around the fort. I spent most of the afternoon riding through it."

"You left the fort—rode outside alone?"

He paused to look down at her through the thickening shadows. "Of course. Why not?"

"Haven't you been told the Indians are constantly attacking the whites? Besides, there are outlaws—a huge gang of them."

David Montebrook chuckled. "I've heard all that. In fact, General Cullen insisted, or tried to insist, upon giving me an escort of troopers. But I wouldn't have it. I think many of the stories about Indians and outlaws are—well, sheer imagination. Soldiers are great tale-spinners. I saw a couple of groups of Indians today—passed within yards of them—and they didn't bother me or even appear threatening."

They walked on toward the western end of the compound. "Let's turn here, Montebrook said. His fingers tightened on her arm. "There's a path through that stand of trees ahead. Rather nice."

As they entered the deeper darkness, where tall cottonwoods dropped heavy shadows, Montebrook paused. Unthinkingly, Risa stepped away from him but immediately checked herself. Bill Jessup, whom she had come here to marry, was still remote and armored against her. And the man beside her had both wealth and position. Instead of leaving Fort Wayne as Jessup's wife, she might leave as David Montebrook's bride. As Lady Montebrook. It was worth considering. . . .

"Tell me about England," she said. "And London, especially London."

"I will, sometime. But tonight I'm only interested in you," he said, and his hand slid, very slowly, down her arm to her wrists. "You're so lovely and perplexing."

"Perplexing?" she repeated, touching the word with laughter.

"Yes." His voice lowered until it brought him even closer. "You seem demure as a schoolgirl, but you're actually something completely different. An exciting woman who isn't afraid of life, who dares take what she wants." There was a strange deliberateness in his words.

"I don't think I understand. You say I dare take what I want, as if—"

"So do I," he cut in swiftly. "So does everyone with courage."

"But—"

He bent, abruptly, and kissed her. The too-dry hands closed on her shoulders, and his mouth was heavy against her lips. He

pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, swiftly, urgently, firmly. Surprise flickered through her and became uneasy anger. He was entirely without hesitancy, completely sure of her response. Of her. She straightened, sharply, and freed herself.

"I'm the one who's perplexed," she said. "In fact, I'm astonished. Good night."

"Hold on. Now, really—"

"I said good night, Lord Montebrook."

SHE left him there and hurried back through the darkness. Clouds had dropped over the thin slice of moon, and in the tree shadows, the night was ominous and black. Her stride slowed. Had something moved through the darkness? Had she heard the whisper of a stealthy footstep? Her heart lifted to a wild, ragged tatoo. Someone was near and silently waiting.

Desperately, she smothered the scream breaking from her lips. "You!" she called softly. "Who are you? What do you want?"

A tall outline emerged from the gloom. "Captain Jessup, ma'am." He was a vague, faceless shape, directly before her. "Sorry I scared you."

"Oh . . ." She drew a long breath. She had expected rushing, violent danger. Anger sparked again. "You certainly did frighten me! But why were you following me?"

"I wasn't following you, ma'am."

"Then what brought you here, to this out-of-the-way corner?"

He laughed. "There aren't any out-of-the-way corners on an army post. I'm on duty tonight as executive officer."

"Do executive officers usually patrol the fort grounds?"

"On the frontier they do, if they're smart. They constantly check up on every detail, even making sure of where the patrols and sentries are at any given time. Believe me, ma'am, it never occurred to me that you might be anywhere except in General Cullen's house."

It never occurred to him. He hadn't thought of her at all. He was still armored and remote, barricaded against her. Well, she would test the strength of his armor.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I must have been a little hysterical. It's so dark I've lost all sense of direction. Maybe," her voice slowed and softened— "you wouldn't mind taking me to the house."

"I'll be glad to. Stay close and follow me."

"But I can barely see you. I'd better take your arm."

"Certainly." He moved to her side and she groped for the proffered arm, her hand moving swiftly until it touched his wrist. Letting her fingers remain for a second on the hard-muscled flesh, she swayed toward him until the filmy black dress was a warm, lightly clinging veil.

He started forward and for minutes they walked in silence. Finally, almost casually, he said, "You didn't go out alone."

Her pulses lifted in sudden, startling exultancy. If he knew that, then he hadn't been merely checking on the location of the patrols. He had seen her and Montebrook leave, had known the direction they had taken. "No, I didn't."

They could now see the dim glow of lights from the Cullen house. "Thank you," she said and dropped her hand from his arm. "It isn't necessary to take me to the door. I feel quite safe now."

"Sure?"

"Yes. Good night, Captain Jessup."

"Risa." The quick, low word halted her and drove her pulses into a fast triumphant rhythm. "I think I ought to tell you. You're getting mixed up in something—making a bad mistake. I'll admit almost anything is possible, on the frontier, for a girl like you. But don't forget that 'almost.' Montebrook isn't part of the frontier. He may seem like your great

opportunity because he's rich and has a title. But that's just what will trip you up."

"You're trying to warn me about David Montebrook," Risa said quietly. "But you're not being very clear."

"Then I'll come to the point. Montebrook will never make anything but a highly 'suitable' marriage. He'd probably be the first to admit it. If he married a governess—a former actress—it would mean sheer ruin to a man like him."

Risa stared up at him through the gloom. "You seem to know a great deal about him."

"Knowing about Montebrook and his kind are part of my job."

"You're—" She caught the words back. If Jessup resented the other man's attentions, it might mean that his armor was starting to crack.

"I don't believe David's like that," she said, her voice sounding confused. "You can't be sure of what you said." She swayed closer, impulsively, and her head tilted, sending the scent of her hair into his nostrils.

"Listen to me!" he snapped. "The only thing for you to do is leave—go back where you belong."

"I can't." A quick, unsteady breath drove through her parted lips. "I can't!"

"Yes, you can." He touched her shoulder gently, encouragingly. "It can be arranged—"

He broke off and caught her into his arms. His kiss was lightning flashing through the night, tearing the darkness from the sky. A flame of captured lightning was on his lips and hers, recklessly joining them. The wild, growing brightness destroyed thought, and her eyes closed against the shaking brilliance. There was no armor encasing him now. Instead . . .

"Risa." Bill Jessup's voice was calling her, forcing her back to reality. He was holding her lightly, ready to release her. "It's time for you to go in." His voice was thin and edged with distance. The remoteness had returned.

She moved away from him, studying him in silence. "Why did you warn me against David Montebrook?" she asked finally. "Was it because you—"

"No," he cut in ruthlessly. "Not because I want you for myself. I meant what I said. Go home. Everybody on this frontier is playing for high stakes. If you get into the game and lose—there won't be anything after that."

Once more his face was a dim, remote shape in the gloom. He was rejecting her, telling her she could have no place in his world anymore than in Montebrook's.

But he could be wrong. He was very wrong about David Montebrook.

She turned and walked lightly away from him.

CHAPTER THREE

A Wall of Armor

RISA awakened to the sound of running hoofs. She sat up in bed and saw the brittle gray light of dawn spilling through the window. A bugle was calling again. Calling with swift, terrible urgency.

Sliding out of bed, she went to the window. Troopers were riding toward the gates. At stacatto commands, they formed into double lines. Near the wall two officers sat their mounts. One of them was General Cullen and the other, Bill Jessup.

When the last of the cavalrymen were in place, Jessup, big and easy in the saddle, sent his horse forward through the open gates. The troopers rode after him and the ominous bugle-cry stopped.

Risa shivered. Something had happened. The raw violence of the wilderness had penetrated into the fort, had swept over its futile walls. The regiment was going into action with Bill Jessup at its head.

She moved from the window, pulled on

a heavy silk robe, stepped into slippers and hurried out to the upper hall. She had to know the answer. She couldn't simply wait while the cold terror grew.

The hall was empty and the house was still. But as she ran downstairs, the front door opened and General Cullen entered.

"Miss Storm! All the commotion must have awakened you. After a little while, you'll get so used to it, you won't hear it—not even the bugle."

"It sounded as if there was trouble."

"Yes. Plenty of trouble. Of the six troopers guarding the cattle on pasturage outside the fort three have been killed and two others wounded. The cattle's gone. Driven off or stampeded."

"Indians again?"

"No. The Prairie Riders gang. But hadn't you better go back to bed, ma'am? Everything's in hand. The wounded men are in the fort hospital and Captain Jessup'll take care of the rest of it."

The girl shivered again. Bill Jessup was racing through the gray wilderness after outlaws who had left three dead soldiers behind them. She mounted the stairs slowly, still seeing the line of troopers—and Jessup—following the killers who might be waiting in ambush.

She nearly ran down David Montebrook on the second-floor landing. "Quite a row, wasn't it?" he said. "Thought a regular war had broken out. Oh, now," as he saw the strained whiteness of her face. "Don't look like that. The whole thing was nothing more than—"

"Outlaws killed three of the troopers watching the cattle and wounded two others."

"Oh, that's the trouble, eh? Cheeky, to come right up to the fort. But there's still nothing for you to worry about. Can't you understand that and stop being afraid?"

"I wish I could."

"Then I'll see that you do. We'll go for a ride outside the fort, just the two of us. Unless General Cullen objects, of course. But I'm sure he won't mind when I explain the reason. Afterward you'll realize there's no more danger on one side of the walls than on the other."

"In spite of Indians and outlaws?"

He smiled. "We may see a few Indians, but they won't bother us. I'm sure of that. Will you go?"

Her eyes darkened. Go alone in wilderness where violence always waited. . . . He was watching her, his blue glance measuring, appraising. Some men despised cowardice even in a girl.

"Yes," she said, forcing her tones to lighten. "I think I will."

"Good." He put an approving hand on her arm. "You're so lovely," he added. "So lovely and unbelievable." The insistence was in his eyes again. The disturbing, signaling recognition.

"Even at this hour?" she laughed. "No, don't answer. I'm going back to bed right now."

"Wait, Risa. You were angry last night and I don't blame you. I'd like to make a fresh start—begin over again."

"Isn't every day, every minute, a fresh start?"

His head bent and his eyes sharpened, became claiming. "Yes, you are puzzling. Contradictory. Perhaps you play many different parts—take a new role with each new person."

Uneasiness edged against her. "Meaning that I'm always acting?"

"You might be," he said and kissed her abruptly, his full mouth crushing her lips with dry, hard warmth. . . .

RISA put down the book she had been trying to read and walked restlessly to the dresser, on which she had left David Montebrook's note. After reading it once more, she folded it into a small, tight square and dropped it into a drawer. She couldn't see him tonight, but had her an-

swer, given to the orderly who delivered the note, been too firm, too formal? Would he really believe she had a headache? Or would he suspect that she intended the headache to become much too severe for her to ride with him the next day?

She turned down the lamp wick and paced to the window. A thin, bright moon was spilling light over the fort and the hills beyond. And somewhere, it was also shining down on Bill Jessup. . . .

A knock sounded from behind her. A careful, quiet knock. David Montebrook was so determined to see her, he had come to her room! She wouldn't answer. . . . But she had to answer. Moving noiselessly to the mirror, she smoothed her hair. "Yes?" she said gently, and opened the door.

Bill Jessup stepped past her into the room. Closing the door, he stood against it and said: "Don't get excited and raise a ruckus. The General and Mrs. Cullen might not understand." His face was gaunt, and new, sharp lines bracketed his mouth.

Risa stared at him for a long, unbelieving moment before realization rushed through her. Dizzying, shaking realization. "You're here—you've come back! I didn't even hear the soldiers return."

He grinned and the lines about his mouth deepened. "We don't always raise a hullabaloo. But we didn't exactly sneak into the fort, either. The cattle we brought back made plenty of noise."

"Then you caught up with the outlaws?" she asked.

"A few. But most of the gang lit out, leaving the cattle behind. I'd hoped to take some prisoners but we didn't."

"Did they all escape?"

"Not exactly. Some of them were dead." He stepped away from the door and his green-sheened glance dropped over her. "Let's sit down."

"No." Her eyes were quiet as they met his. "This isn't the time or the place for a visit. As you've said, the Cullens might not understand."

"I'm sure they wouldn't. And if they found me here they'd know you had let me in, since obviously I didn't break down the door. Besides, I might accidentally let it slip about your visit to my quarters. So don't you think we ought to be very quiet?"

Risa's chin lifted and the white edges of her teeth showed against her scarlet lips. "You—"

"I'll say it for you. I'm lower than a sand snake," he said and walking to the chair beside the lamp-table, pulled another smaller chair close to it.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

JESSUP leaned forward, and once more his glance dropped over the smoke-thin robe which was wrapped around her. His mouth corners tilted; his eyes became amber. "Too much—but let's forget that. I'm worried about Montebrook and figured you could help both me and Lord David."

Risa sat down. "If he's suddenly worrying you—"

"Give me a chance to explain," Jessup broke in. "But first, to keep the record straight, I want to admit I don't like the British very much."

"Then why—"

"I'm trying to tell you. In spite of my feelings about the English, I think Montebrook's all right. Regular. But the general's received information that he's one of a number of foreigners who're in this country to stir the Indians up against the United States."

"No one could believe that! He's a guest in General Cullen's home and—"

"I know. I happen to feel that way myself. But the information came through military channels and Cullen's inclined to accept it."

Uneasiness touched her, signaled a warn-

ing. She said quietly, "I don't understand why you're telling this to me. I've nothing to do with military matters."

"I hoped you'd help me clear Montebrook of suspicion, especially as he seemed —important to you."

Color stung into her cheeks. "Certainly, I'll help him if I can. But how?"

"I was all wrong when I said Montebrook wouldn't consider a marriage which wasn't socially advantageous. You could make most men forget everything else in the world."

The pulses in her wrists lifted and struggled against the flesh. As they had struggled under his touch. . . .

"I believe," he added, "you'll pull it off and wind up with everything you want."

Risa's eyes darkened. Her pulses were no longer struggling, but beating violently. Pounding with sudden hatred, with a wild desire to strike at him. She stood up. "I don't believe you wanted to talk about David."

"Sorry." He, too, got to his feet. "I really do want to help him."

"Then tell me what to do."

"The general happened to mention that Montebrook asked permission to take you for a ride outside the fort—alone. That's one of the things which makes Cullen believe he's here to create trouble—his riding around the country alone. If you'd go with him you could probably prove that his refusal of a trooper-escort doesn't mean anything, that he's not a foreign agent. You could testify that he hadn't met or communicated with anyone on the outside."

"I'd intended to go." She hesitated, fear pressing coldly against her. "I told David I would, but now I'm not sure. I have a terrible headache."

"You never meant to go," Jessup said crisply. "You're afraid. Everything about the territory frightens you. But if you don't, the charge against Montebrook will stand and he'll be in for a lot of trouble."

"I'm sure that won't bother you."

The green-sheened glance met hers. "I figure even an Englishman ought to get a square deal." He was remote again. Unreachable. He had said *most* men would forget everything in the world for her, but he, himself—he would forget nothing. . . . Suddenly she knew if she could break through his armor, shatter it completely, she would be free. Free to take the life she might have with David Montebrook.

"Do you really want me to go with him tomorrow?" she asked, a little unsteadily.

"Yes."

"Will it change your mind about me? Wipe out our meeting in Elk Town?"

Shadows moved across his eyes. "I never saw you before you came to Fort Wayne."

Her face tilted and her fire-scarlet mouth curved. "And the night I slipped into your cabin to—to—" Her words broke off and she swayed toward him. "You kissed me that night," she murmured.

"Yes." His voice dropped to hoarseness, and he took her red, waiting mouth, caught her tightly against him. Once more she was standing under a night sky ripped by brilliant lightning. Then she was back in the lamp-lit room where Bill Jessup had taken her into his arms.

He released her and turned to the door, saying crisply: "I'm counting on you. Be ready at noon. And don't let leaving the fort scare you. You'll be safe. Good night."

CHAPTER FOUR

No Surrender

RISA was smiling as she went down the steps toward David Montebrook and the waiting ponies, but her lips felt stiff and her hands were icy.

"I hope you don't mind riding astride," he said. "There isn't a side saddle in the fort."

"Not at all." The coldness within her was growing, numbing her senses. "Ready to start?"

"Right." He helped her into the saddle and mounted his own horse. "We'll ride toward the hills and—" His words stopped as six cavalrymen cantered up the steps and reined in.

The nearest trooper saluted. "We're to go with you and the young lady, sir."

"No, you're not. We don't want an escort."

"Sorry, sir. General Cullen's orders. He said to explain that while he doesn't wish to force an escort on you, he is responsible for Miss Storm's safety."

"But—"

"The general said the young lady's not to leave the fort unless we accompany her."

"Now, look here," Montebrook began heatedly.

"David," Risa broke in, feeling some of the chill fear leave her. "It doesn't make any difference. We'll enjoy the ride just as much. Besides, the men can't disobey orders."

Mountebrook's heavy-cornered mouth set, but he nodded and lifted the reins. "Whatever you say, although I wanted to convince you that you don't need an armed guard out there."

The troopers followed them through the gates, onto a wheel-made trail. "Let's cut across toward the hills," the Englishman said. "There's a pretty little stream up there."

They turned off onto the range. The troopers, keeping a little behind, clattered after them. The stream was actually a river, and its rushing water was blue as the sky. Risa became aware of the sun, the wood-scented breeze and the rich green of the hills.

"I'm glad we came," she told Montebrook as they left the river and continued north, into the foothills. "This is lovely. It's even restful."

Montebrook chuckled. "You didn't expect that, did you? The next time I'd like to start earlier and—"

"Pull in!" one of the soldiers behind them shouted. "Stop your horse, ma'am!"

Startled, the girl jerked at her reins as the troopers jumped their mounts forward and charged past her and the Englishman. Their guns swept up and leveled.

Indians were pouring out of a fold in the hills. Their horses were traveling at top speed; long guns were cracking. A high, savage yell broke from dozens of throats as the Indians swept down on the whites. Within what seemed seconds, the troopers, Montebrook and the girl were surrounded. The soldiers were shooting wildly and nervously, ineffectually.

"Drop guns!" one of the braves ordered. "Drop guns—give up—live."

The troopers paused, wavered and let their weapons fall. The Indians pressed in and their leader began to issue orders. Two braves wheeled into place beside Montebrook and one of them snatched the reins from his hands. Then his pony was led away from the troopers and another group of savages took charge of him. The cavalrymen were herded together, encircled by six Indians. Then the rest of the Indian band wheeled and rode back into the hills, taking David Montebrook with them.

Risa stared, unbelievingly, at the troopers. How quickly and easily they had surrendered! How almost-casual they seemed now, as prisoners of the Indians! One of them was smiling, faintly, as he talked to the others in a low tone.

Abruptly, the sun was fiercely hot, the sky white emptiness and the land bleak. Painted red men were watching her with unblinking, threatening eyes. Yet strangely, cold, paralyzing fear had left her. It had happened and she could do nothing, now, except wait for what might come.

Still the savages continued to surround her and the soldiers. Hours must have passed. No, the sun was too high. Probably only an hour.

Hoofs slapped from somewhere beyond the fold in the hills. The Indians were returning. And David Montebrook was with them, apparently unharmed.

Risa's glance flicked from him to the Redmen and encountered green-sheened eyes in a coppery face. Big and easy in the saddle, a prominent nose and high cheek bones. Bill Jessup, bare to the waist, his skin painted and daubed to make him look like an Indian! And some of the savages with him were disguised white men. What could it mean?

David Montebrook called, "It's all right, Risa. We're to be released."

As if at a signal, the braves riding beside him turned back. Those guarding the girl and troopers spurred away, and the entire Indian war party raced back into the hills.

"What did they do to you?" she asked. "I—I was so afraid!"

He grinned and shook his head. "That was the worst part of the business—knowing how you must feel. But I wasn't worried, myself. There's always a way out of such situations."

"But what? How did you get them to let you go?"

"Money. Even savages like it. But let's get started for the fort. Where's our escort?" Turning in the saddle, he looked back at the troopers, smiling ironically. "We don't want them to get lost."

"But what happened? Where did they take you?"

"We'd better not stop to talk about it now. Ready?" And he spurred his horse forward.

The girl rode after him. "David, when they were bringing you back—" She stopped. Her lips refused to form the rest of the words.

"Yes?" the Englishman asked.

But Risa shook her head. "I can't remember what I started to say. I guess I'm still too shocked to think."

She simply couldn't tell him that Bill Jessup, Captain Bill Jessup, had been one of the Indians.

HE was in the schoolroom with Tad and Hank Cullen when a bugle call once more rang through the fort. An urgent, commanding, startling cry. The little boys immediately dived from their seats and rushed out through the door.

When Risa followed them, Mrs. Cullen and the children were on the porch, watching the troopers line up before the waiting officers.

"The Indians have attacked a ranch ten miles south of here. An isolated place where the people were helpless. Someone brought word just a few minutes ago."

"The whole regiment's going this time," Hank spoke up. "Daddy, too."

Mrs. Cullen's pink face was creased with worry. "I can't understand what Thaddeus is thinking of! He's leaving only a few soldiers—six, I think—here to look after things. If anything happens . . ." Her words trailed off as the gates opened and the regiment rode swiftly out of the fort.

Six soldiers to defend the post in case of trouble! Yet the chill terror she had felt so often did not touch her now. "It's time to go back, boys," she told the youngsters quietly. "And you mustn't leave the schoolroom again without permission."

They scurried along the hall ahead of her, but in spite of their clatter, the house seemed very quiet. As if the still emptiness of the fort had entered it.

She had not seen David Montebrook since the night before. She was still puzzled by his refusal to talk of his brief experience as an Indian captive. But she thought she understood the rest of the incident. Incredible though it seemed, it was nothing but a cruel trick. Bill Jessup had insisted on her leaving the post with Montebrook because he hoped that the Englishman would turn coward. He had wanted her to see Montebrook terror-stricken and

helpless. The whole thing had been staged!

As she reached the schoolroom, the two children chorused from the doorway, "He said we can go out again! He said school's over for the day!"

"He?" Then behind them she saw David Montebrook.

"Something's come up," he said, signaling for agreement. "Something so important I was sure you'd let them go outside to play." His blue eyes were intense, insistent, but they also held excitement. Or triumph.

"Why, yes, if it's necessary." She turned slowly back to the boys. "You can leave, but stay close to the house. Your mother doesn't want you wandering around the fort."

They ran down the hall, and Montebrook motioned her inside and closed the door. "Risa." His arms reached for her. "Tell me now, right away. You care for me, don't you? Love me?"

"Is that the reason you asked me to dismiss the children?"

"Yes. That is, one of the reasons. Listen to me." His arms closed around her. "We'll be on our way out of this wilderness in a few hours. As soon as we reach Elk Town we'll be married—I don't care what questions people at home ask—and then we'll start east."

"Not so fast—please!" she cried breathlessly. This was what she had planned so long. This was what she had schemed, cheated and lied to get. Money, marriage, and a secure, silken world. But he was moving so fast, her head was reeling.

"You'd better explain. You seem to think everything's arranged even before I've had a chance to say yes."

He grinned. "Guess I did sort of rush at you. But haven't you wondered about me? Aren't you surprised that the entire regiment's left the fort? Imagine a frontier army post manned by only a few soldiers."

"I don't understand. What's that got to do with our leaving?"

"A great deal. I'm the one who managed the departure of the troops."

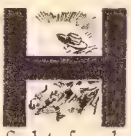
"You?"

He nodded. "I came here to do a job and I've done it. And found you, too. When you're my wife I'll take you all over the world—"

"You say you came to do a job. Here, on the frontier?"

"Exactly." He laughed and the excitement flared in his eyes. "We want to make it tough, almost impossible, for the United States to keep a foothold in this territory. So I've been in touch with the Indians and some other men—given them money, explained where they'd find caches of firearms, and so on. The Indian attack on the ranch in the south was carefully directed. The message to the army post was carefully worked out, too—a call for help that had to bring out the greater part of the garrison."

Risa's eyes were blazing. "You *paid* the Indians to raid the ranch, to kill and destroy?"



HIS glance sharpened. "You don't understand. Maybe this isn't war, but it's just as grim—just as important. This is a fight for land, for empire. The Americans have no right to this country. They don't know how to hold it. They haven't the intelligence. A bunch of peasants! What do they think the world is? A sand-pile for nice children to play in?"

Risa couldn't speak. The fear and terror were back. A more shaking terror, an icier fear than she had ever known.

"The regiment was tricked away, then?" she managed finally.

He nodded, his eyes watchful. "In a little while, a few minutes, I'll send a signal to men waiting in the foothills. They'll rush down and take the fort. Demolish it. Even if the Americans try to rebuild it, they'll have lost whatever prestige they ever had with the Indians."

Risa drew a quick, hard breath. "How will you send the signal?"

Montebrook smiled. "I'll set fire to the top of this house. As soon as it's burning well, it will be seen in the hills."

Risa shivered. She was encased in ice now. In darkness.

David Montebrook caught her back into his arms. "You're tired, aren't you? You look pale, darling. But you can't rest yet. You must go to your room and pack whatever is necessary—nothing you won't need. Within two hours we'll be on our way."

"Yes." She nodded dazedly. "I'd better hurry."

He kissed her, his dry lips claiming and commanding. But finally she was free. She moved through the hall to the stairs. In two hours, he had said. After that they would be on their way to Elk Town, to marriage, to all she wanted of life.

She paused by the living room, then turned and hurried into General Cullen's den. She closed the door behind her and looked frantically around. Books, chairs, desk. The desk. . . . She went to it, fumbled open the drawers and finally found what she wanted. A loaded pistol.

Gripping it in tight, stiff fingers, she held it close to her side, so that the folds of her skirt concealed it, and returned to the schoolroom. It was empty. She walked quickly through the hall and up the stairs to Montebrook's room.

There was surprise on his face when he opened the door. She lifted the pistol and leveled it. "Step out," she said. "Straight ahead. Now turn and walk toward the stairs."

"Risa! I—I thought you loved me. We're to be married!"

"Keep on going."

He was at the head of the stairs. She quickened her pace, the pistol still leveled. But Montebrook suddenly stopped and dived at her, knocking her off her feet. Before she could shoot, he twisted the gun from her hand.

"Now, my little trickster," he growled, "I'll look after you. I believed in you—I was fool enough to think you cared for me! You're no better than the rest. Come on."

He picked her up and clamped a hand on her mouth to stifle her scream. Carrying her in his arms, he took her into her bedroom and dropped her in the chair near the window. Taking his hand from her mouth, he stuffed a handkerchief into it, stripped off his own scarf and tied it over the gag. Then he ripped the cords from the window curtains and tied her hands and feet.

"Now, lovely lady," he said, "you'll stay here awhile."

Then he was gone. The curtains had fallen into a crumbled heap on the floor and Risa was staring through the unshaded windows. The troopers were near the gates. Nothing else seemed to move. She closed her eyes. Where were Mrs. Cullen and the children? Apparently, no one had heard her struggling with David Montebrook.

LONG time later, it came. Exploding guns, yelling voices. Men were storming the gates of the fort, climbing over the walls, firing as they came. The two sentries at the gates had their hands in the air. They were surrendering. What else could they do?

The gates opened and the armed mob came in. White men. The Prairie Riders. They charged through the grounds of the fort, shooting, yelling orders, driving even the laundresses out into the open.

Risa strained against the chair again. Strained hopelessly against the ropes which tied her to it. The house must be on fire. Montebrook had said that was to be the signal. It wouldn't take long to burn, for the flames to reach her.

The outlaw gang were dismounting, lighting torches. They were going to destroy everything in the fort. And there was an-

other noise added to the din. A high, rolling, beating noise, as if hundreds of hoofs were racing over hard ground. The cattle were being driven off. She tried to bend forward to see them.

But the noise of hoofs was coming from the gates. Horsemen were charging through them. Cavalrymen with barking, coughing guns. The regiment had returned!

She closed her eyes again. It was too late to save her. By the time the fight was over and they reached the house, the fire would have reached her. . . .

The door behind her crashed open. "Risa!"

It was Bill Jessup. His long-bladed hunting knife was cutting through the ropes, freeing her. The bruising, choking gag was gone, but she still could not talk.

"Bill—" Her lips struggled over his name.

"Later," he said. Swiftly, he lifted her in his arms and carried her outside. When he set her down, his eyes were anxious.

"David told me what he was going to do," Risa said. "He wanted me to leave with him, but I found a gun and—"

"I know, Risa, darling," He was still holding her and his face was close to hers, his eyes the color of amber flame. "I love you. I've always loved you."

His hands closed on her arms, pulling her closer to him. "But first you deserve an explanation, after what you've been through. You recognized me the other day when Montebrook was captured by the Indians, didn't you? That was all arranged so we could get information on his plans. He thought that we were friendly Indians, on his payroll. But the Indians with us weren't on his side. We knew, then, that we were supposed to be tricked into leaving the fort so that the Prairie Riders could destroy it. We left the fort but we didn't go far. We just let the outlaws walk right in where we could close the trap on 'em."

"You knew, all the time, what David Montebrook was doing, what he was?"

"Yes." Then, before she could speak again, he bent and took her into his arms. "You are going to leave the fort, Risa, just like I said. But with me—on our honeymoon."

And his kiss pulled the sky down around her, wrapped her in a warmth and love that she knew would last forever.

THE END

Robin had every reason to fear a

Rendezvous With Yesterday

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I'LL LOVE YOU MAÑANA

By McKay Henry, Jr.

Dark-eyed Anita knew it was very bold to propose to her Jimmy—but she never dreamed he'd say no!

ANITA'S heart was pounding like the heavy clop-clop of old Rosa's hoofs, only much, much faster; and little, excited fingers seemed to clutch at her throat. She was riding to the trysting place by the river, and she dreaded what she had to do there. But she'd made up her mind and so she forced herself to be brave. And it took a lot of bravery, too, for such a shy little Spanish girl to ask a man to marry her!

But what eef he refuse? she thought, breathing as hard as if she were running. *I love heem so—thees Jeemy Fairfield. . . .*

Jim Fairfield, the big, blond *Americano*, so tall that Anita had to tilt her head to look up into his face—and so strong that the pressure of his arms, when he kissed her, took her breath away and made every bone in her body ache pleasantly! Jimmy, whose very presence made her heart stampede, but roused in her a poignant worry, too. . . .

For he was so very strange, this Señor Jimmy Fairfield who came out of Mexico by night, across the Rio Grande, to meet her and hold her in his arms and make the world spin about her so crazily. In the dark he'd splash through the drought-lowered river to the American side, but by day he would never leave Mexico. Why? her heart cried out. What was this mystery?

But no matter. Mysterious man or not, she was going to ask him to marry her. For a very good reason—to keep her from having to become the wife of Señor Stryker, the hawk-faced *Americano* who owned the saloon of the Long Bar.

Señor Stryker had looked upon Anita favorably ever since she'd fled from her cruel uncle in Santa Rita, deep below the border, to seek peace in the Americano country. Peace. . . . But she had crossed the border without a word to anyone, not knowing that it was strict law for every person to report to the American authorities. Then she heard that the Americanos didn't want immigrants from below the Rio Grande and that the authorities would send her back if they caught her. She became panic-stricken whenever she saw an Americano in the uniform of the men who tended the border.

Once, fearful of meeting one of them, she had retreated into the saloon of the Long Bar, and when Señor Stryker had hidden her in his private office she'd been so weak

"Hey there!" he called. "There's an audience present."

as to sob out the whole story to him, thinking he might be a friend. But when he tried to crush her in his arms, she'd discovered he was no friend.

He was very strong, but Anita was little and slippery, and though she was very grateful to him for having saved her from the authorities, she didn't like the idea of his kisses. She was saving her lips for one man—a man she'd dreamed about ever since she was a little girl. A man who would come into her life like a hero in a story book.

"Some other time, maybe!" Señor Stryker called, when she fought free of him and fled.

He didn't make himself particularly distasteful after that; he was always so polite and respectful that at last Anita decided she'd misjudged him, and even found herself almost liking him. But he was a beast, she found out. Just this evening, in fact, he'd shown himself for what he was when he called on her at the home of Señora Consuelo, who was a cousin of Anita's.

"I've admired you much, ever since you came here," he told her, holding his too-white hat in his pale gambler's fingers. "And I find I'm in love with you, Anita. I wish you to become my wife. Will you marry me?"

"Eet ees kind of you to ask me, Señor," Anita faltered. "But I—I do not love you, Señor. I cannot be your wife!"

A savage look crossed his hard, hawk-like face, and Anita shook with fear. She crowded back in her chair and huddled there, a slim little girl in whose veins Castilian blood ran almost pure; whose hair was like a dense, raven drape over the slenderness of her shoulders; whose eyes caught the light and flashed dark soft glances.

Señor Stryker didn't beat about the bush. He snapped out, "Listen, Anita. You've come into this country when you know that people of your race are not allowed here. If you're found here—well, you'll be sent back. 'Deported', it's called."

"But, Señor!" Anita cried, her heart slamming hard. "That cannot be! Eef they sen' me back, my cruel uncle weel fin' me and beat me!"

"But there's no reason for you to be deported," Señor Stryker said smoothly. "I can tell you the way to remain here north of the Rio Grande."

"You can?" Anita cried eagerly, hope lifting within her.

"Of course. You see, when a woman marries an American, she also becomes an American. Marry me, Anita, and they will never be able to send you back."

"But, Señor Stryker, they do not know I am here. They weel never fin' out, perhaps. . . ." Anita whispered.

But by the look in his eyes, she knew he'd make it his business to see that the American authorities did find out. That was his threat, the club he held over her to force her into marriage. With a little moan deep in her throat and a feeling as if her heart were going to stop, Anita dropped her face into her hands.

"So you see, it is best to marry me," Señor Stryker said. "When shall we have the wedding, little Anita?"

"Señor, I—please, let me theenk—"

He went, then, and the instant the clatter of his horse's hoofs faded, Anita was on her feet. She rushed into her room, to tear off the full-skirted dress she'd been wearing. She rummaged for other clothes, found them, and pulled on levis and a white blouse. She knew instantly what she was going to do. It took a lot of nerve, of course—but anything to keep from marrying Señor Stryker! And this other man would make such a wonderful husband. . . .

Old Rosa, Señora Consuelo's mare, was maddeningly deliberate. She plodded slowly through the dusk to the trysting place by the river, the two big, wind-cut rocks where Señor Jimmy Fairfield would be waiting.

"Rosa, please, you mus' hurry," Anita pleaded, her heart racing ahead to the warmth and thrill of Jim's arms.

She might have lashed Rosa to more speed, but she didn't have the heart when Rosa was old and so weary from having carried Señora Consuelo's children about all day. So Anita controlled her eagerness, though inside she was aflame, as if she had just eaten some of Señora Consuelo's cooking that was too highly spiced! Only this was a very pleasant flame, and one she wished might never cool.

For Jim Fairfield was the man out of the book—the man of whom she'd dreamed. She never tired of remembering the day he'd come into her life. . . .

OSA was lame that day, and Anita had walked and led her. She halted in the shade of the two big rocks, to stare across the river. Her eyes were haunted, for she was remembering her cruel uncle and worrying about being deported.

"But I weel never go back to Santa Rita!" Anita breathed aloud.

She forced this unpleasant thought from her mind and tried to think about good things. She noted a few deep pools in the shallow river, one of which was close to the rocks. The cool depths reminded her that the afternoon sun was like a furnace, and that her clothes clung damply to her.

Thees water ees cool, she thought, and instantly decided on a swim. The countryside was bare of human beings, and with Rosa as the only spectator, Anita began to undress.

But she hadn't more than begun to unbutton her blouse when a voice from a crevice in the rocks froze her. "Hey, there!" it called, in lazy tones that somehow sent queer tingles all over Anita. "There's an audience present. Better wait until dark!"

With her cheeks very and prettily red, Anita straightened her blouse and spun about. A lithe, blond man appeared from behind a rock. There wasn't a bit of embarrassment in his manner, Anita noted instantly; but there was a furtiveness that puzzled her. When he looked at her his eyes were level and friendly but they didn't fix on her for very long. They roved about as if he expected—and dreaded—some visitor.

"Señor—who are you?" Anita stammered.

"Name's Jim Fairfield. Not that it means a thing. But I reckon you're wonderin' where I come from," Jim Fairfield said. "Well, it's a bit hard to explain. I'm stayin' over in Mexico. Don't often cross the river except at night."

He smiled for the first time—a flash of white teeth that sent the warm thrills through Anita again.

"But, Señor—ees that not queer?"

"Pretty little Spanish girls, like everybody else, shouldn't ask questions!" Jim said, smiling. "At least, not too personal ones. In this Americano country, it's a point of etiquette not to ask personal questions. You sabe?"

"Eet ees quite clear to me, Señor Jeem. I am sorree I ask you questions. Thees countree ees new to me, and I deed not know."

With a furtive glance around, Jim left the shade of the rocks and stood staring at the river. "Got to be goin'," he said. "My horse ran away an' I had to chase the critter across the river. It's gone, I guess, for good."

"I am sorree, Señor."

He took a step towards the river, but hesitated. "You ride along here often?" he asked abruptly.

"Whenever the Señora Consuelo's children do not ride Rosa, and Rosa is not too tired. Would it be a break of Americano etiquette eef I asked you why you ask?"

She was intensely curious about his question—and about him. But he gave her no satisfaction; with a brief, "Adios, Señorita," he went down to the river and plunged in. The water came to his knees in most places, and the pools he avoided. Anita

watched him until he became only a speck. When he climbed the Mexican side of the river, she thought he waved, but it was so far away she couldn't be sure. . . .

The next time she rode by the rocks, there he was again. A pair of field-glasses dangled from his belt alongside his gun, and he got a little red when she stared at them.

"I've been watchin' for you!" he confessed. "I saw you a couple of miles off an' waded the river to be here when you showed up."

And then they met again. And again. But it was always after sundown now, because Jim wished it that way. He didn't say why, and Anita, remembering that it was Americano etiquette not to ask questions, never called for an explanation. And she wasn't especially curious, after the first time he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her; all that mattered was that she could meet him every night and be held in his arms. . . .

That first kiss wasn't unexpected. Anita was sitting close to him, and though she was a very shy little girl and had been told that such thoughts were shocking, she wondered how his arms would feel around her. Little pin-points of very pleasant excitement came out all over her, and she shivered in a very faint way that made Jim look at her and ask, "Cold?"

"I—I theenk I am cold, Jeemy."

She looked at him through the dark, starglow glinting from the velvet glossiness of her eyes, her lips invitingly uptilted. Before she could move to resist as she had always understood a nice girl should, his arms were around her and his lips on hers. Then there wasn't any Americano country or Mexico or fear of being deported. Just he and she in a little world of ecstasy by themselves.

Señora Consuelo had always said that you shouldn't let a man kiss you until you were married to him, of course. As if that mattered now! Señora Consuelo had never been in love with such a man as Jim Fairfield. . . .

But now it was tonight, when she had to ask him to marry her, and she had reached their meeting place by the rocks.

HE CAME from the shadows, and the instant Anita dropped from Rosa he enfolded her in his strong, warm arms, pressing her lips until she was so breathless that she cried out and fought away. Not very, hard. When he did let her go she ached all over, but so very pleasantly!

"You're early tonight, *niñita!*" he said.

Niñita—baby. The way he said it made new stars come into the sky, and speeded her heart to a madder pace. There wasn't another man like him in all the world, she was sure. Nor was there another love like hers. . . .

Then she remembered why she'd come tonight, and she had to swallow many times to make her voice sound normal.

"Jeemy, weel you do something for me? Something very great, that weel—weel make me 'appy?"

"Name it an' it's yours! Do you want the moon? I'll get my rope an' hog-tie it for you."

"I—I do not want the moon, Señor Jeemy. Eet ees simply that I . . . Weel you marry me, please, Jeemy? Weel you marry me tomorrow?"

"*Niñita!*"

That was all he said, but dread of an indefinite kind chilled Anita. Jim was stiffening and drawing back. His level look, veiled now by the dark so that she couldn't tell whether it was cool or troubled or tender, bored at her. The moments that passed before he spoke were years long.

"Some day, little Anita, I'll marry you—some day. *Mañana.* But right now I—I can't."

"But, Jeemy, please marry me tomorrow. No, tonight—tonight!"

"Can't do that, Anita," he returned, almost curtly. "I'm sorry you asked me. I was goin' to ask you myself—some day. A

few months from now, maybe. But I *can't* marry you right now, Anita."

She felt his look questioning her, asking her why she wanted to marry him at once. And her Spanish pride lifted. She couldn't tell him, of course; he'd marry her just to be gallant. When he did marry her, she wanted it to be because he loved her. Not for any other reason—just because he loved her and wanted her so badly. . . .

"Some other time," Jim said softly, "I can't tell you the reason why I can't marry you now, Anita, but if you'll wait . . . *Mañana*. . . ."

No doubt his reasons had to do with his curious situation of hiding in Mexico during the day and returning across the border only by night. Anita didn't inquire; she could be as polite as any Americano. Oh, she would be as polite and good as any Americano, tonight and in that *mañana* when he'd ask her to marry him! Until then, she'd hide away in the hills, far from the immigration authorities and Señor Stryker. She'd wait. Of course, that was what she'd do; always women waited for their men. . . .

"I weel wait, Jeemy," she said faintly. "But I weel see you tomorrow night here?"

"I'm afraid not, *niñita*. Next night. I've got business tomorrow night."

Old Rosa carried her slowly home, and she crept into Señora Consuelo's house softly so as not to waken the children. Then came morning and noon, and evening, and she wasn't seeing Jim Fairfield when she wanted his arms around her so much again. . . .

"Go to town!" Consuelo scolded when Anita kept moping moodily about the house. "There is a fiesta at the house of Señor Hull, and the whole town is invited. Go there and dance and laugh."

"But I have no duenna," Anita protested.

"Foolish!" Consuelo said scornfully. "Do you not know that here among the Americanos a duenna is not the custom any more? The American girls can take care of themselves. And you, with the blood of the grandees in your veins, will be safe. The American cowboys are very rough but very gallant."

So Anita, in the long-skirted dress which she had brought from below the border, started out for Señor Hull's fiesta. She had to pass the Long Bar but, as Consuelo said, the Americanos were very gallant and she had nothing to fear. The men grouped before the batwing doors stared at her, but not offensively—they looked in a way that made Anita feel pleased with herself. They didn't give every girl who passed so many admiring glances!

She was crossing the mouth of the dark alley next to the Long Bar when a door of the saloon, down the alley, banged open and allowed a flood of light to pour out. A man, obviously leaving, was in the light. He didn't see Anita in the instant that he gathered himself to duck furtively into the dark. But Anita glimpsed him clearly, very clearly—the whole, tall length of him.

Jim Fairfield.

Jim Fairfield—leaving Señor Stryker's private office. Anita stopped as if a blow had halted her. What could it mean? But she knew, without thinking about it twice. She knew as if some unseen power whispered it to her.

Jim had told her he couldn't marry her now. *Mañana*, perhaps. But not now. Because—Anita's throat trembled—because he was in the pay of Señor Stryker, and Señor Stryker was determined to marry her himself!

All of Jimmy Fairfield's talk about *mañana* was just a bluff. That furtive manner of his, the things he couldn't explain—everything that was not open about him Anita remembered now. Pride had kept her from asking him why he couldn't marry her. She'd been puzzled. But she wasn't puzzled any more!

"Jeemy—oh, Jeemy!" she whispered, standing there very still. "How could you do eet?"

SHE tried desperately to find something that might justify him. But all she could remember was his secretiveness. Which she hadn't inquired about because he'd impressed upon her that Americanos never asked questions! Oh, he was clever—clever and cruel. No doubt he'd deliberately made love to her so that she wouldn't become interested in someone else, someone Señor Stryker didn't control. Somehow, between them, they'd see that Señor Stryker became her husband. . . .

"But I am not licked!" Anita said aloud. "Señor Stryker has not won!"

Suddenly, where there should have been a heart inside her, there wasn't a heart any more. Only a big space weighted with a slow-swinging pendulum of lead. And something told her that it would always be thus; never again would a hero out of a book come into her life. Jim Fairfield was no hero now; but she'd thought he was once and loved him.

But I love him no more! Anita thought. *I weel forget him. I mus'!* Her back stiffened to the rush of her Castilian pride, and she stood as straight and tall as she could. *I weel go to the fiesta—and dance with the Americanos—and never again theenk of Jeemy!*

When her uncle had beaten her, she'd cried. There had been bruises all over her body. But she didn't cry now, though this was a much greater bruise, and on her heart. Eyes dry but suspiciously shiny, she went to Señor Hull's house. She went through the door into the fiesta—and halted when a man in the uniform of the Americano authorities stepped up to her.

Anita thought he was going to arrest her, and she turned sick. Broken though she was by Jim Fairfield's falseness, she still had her dread of being deported. It was very nice here north of the border and the thought of again being in her cruel uncle's clutches made her shudder. Anything rather than going back to *that!*

But the Americano authority merely smiled and said, "Will you dance, Señorita?" and Anita, with a rush of relief, went into his arms. They danced around the floor, Anita's very high heels, which she wore to make herself taller, twinkling from under the long sweep of her skirt. The Americano was a very good dancer, she thought. He had strong arms. Like Jeem's strong, false arms.

But she must forget Jim—she must! She forced herself to listen to the Americano's conversation.

"I've noticed you around here," he was saying. "I've wondered about you, Señorita. You didn't report to us here. Where did you cross the border?"

"I—I 'ave reported down along the river."

"What town?"

Fresh fear gripped Anita, and her twinkling heels missed a beat. "I am sorree, Señor," she apologized, trying to change the conversation. "I do not dance very well tonight, no?"

"You dance very well. But I'm curious where you crossed the border. We keep pretty close track of everybody from south of the border. And I'm sure we wouldn't have missed a pretty girl like you!"

"Eet ees a crime to cross the border?"

"It is to come in without reporting. And you're evading the question, young lady," he said, half in jest and half in seriousness, too. "I'll have to know where you crossed the border in order to check up on you."

"Please, Señor," Anita heard herself whisper. "I am not feeling so well! I mus' go home. You weel not mind eef we do not feenish thees dance, no?"

"Not at all." He escorted her as far as the door. "Better come around to the office tomorrow so we can check up on you."

Anita couldn't guess that the Americano authority was just half serious. She didn't know that he wanted only to see her again, as what man wouldn't? She only knew that she'd lost—that Señor Stryker had won, for

now there was but one way she could remain here north of the Rio Grande.

"Señor Stryker, I mus' marry you!" Anita whispered, hurrying towards the Long Bar. "But eet weel not be so bad!" she tried to convince herself. "Senor Stryker weel be good to me, perhaps. And I weel be a good wife to heem."

Señor Stryker was in his private office—the office that Jim Fairfield had slipped out of so recently. He looked up when Anita entered, and his eyes glittered.

"Well, Anita?"

"I—I 'ave come to marry you, Señor!"

"That's wonderful, Anita!" He exhaled a big breath. "I've got some business to attend to, but I'll send you out to my ranch east of here until the wedding. My sister is there and she'll take good care of you."

"But an Americano authority 'ave told me to see heem tomorrow—"

"That'll be all right," Stryker returned carelessly. "I'll explain that we're getting married. That'll take care of things."

And evidently it did, for when Anita rode out of town with Stryker in the buckboard next morning, they passed the Americano authority and he did nothing but tip his hat politely. There was a disappointed look on his face, Anita could see, and she thought this was because he was angry at not being able to deport her. She didn't know he was vexed because he wasn't going to see her again.

Señor Stryker's ranch was big and his ranch house was a huge, rambling affair. Señor Stryker delivered Anita at once into the hands of his sister, a thin, sour-faced woman who muttered something about her brother's taste, but was nevertheless cordial enough.

"I plan the marriage ten days from today," Señor Stryker said. "That should give me time to take care of my business. I shall be gone until then. Sister, you will have everything ready for the wedding. Anita will wear the wedding veil my first wife wore."

Anita hadn't known Señor Stryker was married once, and she was a little shocked.

"The wedding veil my first wife wore," Señor Stryker repeated. "It is for luck. Her fortune was luck for me!"

TEN days passed, without a word from outside the ranch. And then it was the wedding day, and Anita stood on the stairway, watching Señor Stryker at the far end of a room elaborately decorated for the wedding. And a little later she stood before the padre, beside Señor Stryker, waiting for the word which would make her his wife.

She hadn't seen anything of Jim Fairfield, and she'd wondered a little about what he had done when he did not find her by the river. But of course he hadn't kept any appointment. It wasn't necessary.

Forgetting him wasn't so easy. She could control her thoughts, but she hadn't any power over her dreams. And in them Jim Fairfield would be by her side, and she would wake with the warmth of his lips on hers, but her arms cold as ice.

Of course, she would be able to forget him absolutely after she was the wife of Señor Stryker. A good wife wouldn't think of any other man, ever. And she intended to be a good wife. Wasn't Señor Stryker doing her a great service in keeping her north of the Rio Grande?

But what was the padre saying? Words hummed in her ears—her own low voice answering a question, Stryker's rough, "I do!" She knew that in another instant she'd be the Señora Stryker. She flipped her veil over Señor Stryker's arm, took a deep breath to keep up her courage, threw back her head—and looked straight into the eyes of Jim Fairfield!

There was a bloody bandage around his left shoulder. And he was unshaven and grimmer-looking than she'd ever seen him. In the background was a man with hand-

(Continued on page 109)

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THE OUTLAW and THE ANGEL

By L. P. Holmes

A posse was after dashing Tracy Hale's neck—
but Alda still wanted his heart.

THE rain fell in dismal, slanting sheets, hiding from sight the massive flanks of the San Simeon Mountains to the East, and with it came the wind from the north-east, burly and rough and boisterous. Sudden, driving gusts of it drove the rain with stinging impact into the faces of the little band of white-faced cattle, causing them to slow and bunch and try to turn back, and drift before the storm, rather than bore their way through it.

Yet each time the forlorn brutes would balk, the small, slicker-clad figure on the little paint pony would yip at them in a tired voice and slap their reluctant ribs with the slippery loop of a rawhide riata.

To Alda Rawlins, this storm epitomized her entire experience with the great Southwest frontier. From the very first it had been an unrelenting battle, a ceaseless war with hostile elements or hostile men in an alien land. She recalled bitterly the enthusiasm with which she had received her uncle's declaration that he was leaving the crowded Mississippi Valley to settle in the Southwest cattle country for a new start. She recalled the high, almost exalted courage she had known when they had pulled out in their canvas-covered prairie schooner, in company with four other wagons.

How long ago had that been? It seemed a lifetime, but it was not quite a year. And in that short space of time everything had changed. Many things had happened, and tragic blows had fallen on Alda's slim shoulders. The most stunning, heartbreaking of all had been her uncle's tragic death, less than two months after the humble little cabin had been completed in the cottonwood grove beside Apache Creek. A fall from a bronc had killed her gruff, kindly uncle, who had been both father and mother to her since she was barely old enough to toddle, and since then Alda had been alone.

The push of the wind grew heavier as Alda fought along. The cattle slowed and bunched once more, stubborn and reluctant. Alda spurred into them, her tired arm slashing out again and again with the riata end. She forced an attempt at gaiety and spirit.

"Hi-yah! Get along little dogies . . ."

The words frittered out, sticking in her

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Tracy took her into his arms, then and there.

thickening throat. It was no use. This savage country had her whipped.

"Hi-yah! Get along lil' dogies!"

Alda caught her breath, straightening in the saddle. Was that an echo? She brushed a hand across her eyes and stared. There, not ten yards from her, was a rider in a gleaming black slicker on a great black horse. And that horse was pouring its weight and spirit against the lagging drag of the little herd, while the rider was flailing wet bovine flanks with a whirling riata end. The pace of the cattle immediately picked up.

Then the mysterious rider was looking over at Alda and it seemed that she caught the quick gleam of a white-toothed smile. His voice came to her, mellow and drawling and pleasant.

"How far you aimin' to drift these critters, ma'am?"

"To the corrals below my cabin," she answered. "About another mile."

"Fine," came the answer. "I was afraid it might be two-three times that far. Which would have made things tough, for it's goin' to get dark early tonight. Not over half an hour of light left. Hi-yah! Hi-yah! Roll your tails bossy cows—roll 'em."

ALDA rode on in a daze. Sudden suspicion caused her brown eyes to narrow. She stared at the stranger covertly. She could see little of his face beneath the soggy, dripping brim of his sombrero, but that little showed a lean jaw and a hawkish nose. As he spun his mount to pick up a laggard of the herd, she saw that his shoulders were wide and flat. He rode as though he was part of his horse.

Alda slid a furtive hand back to the saddle bags lashed across the cantle. She loosened the flap of one and touched the chill contours of her uncle's old long-barreled Peacemaker revolver. She hoped she wouldn't have to flash that weapon. But she had before—twice.

The herd slogged up a slippery, drenched slope, bawled mournfully as they faced the increased impact of wind and rain at the crest, then went down the other side toward a thin line of corral fence beside the roaring, turgid waters of Apache Creek.

The stranger swung in closer to Alda. "That the place?" he asked.

Alda nodded. The wind seemed to howl with renewed intensity, as though angry at being beaten. "That's it," Alda shouted back. "The gate is open. Haze 'em along."

The cattle slogged through the gate and headed thankfully into a grove of cottonwoods and alders at the lower end. They would stick close to that shelter until the storm was over.

Above the corrals the bulk of Alda's sturdy little cabin showed through the thickening gloom. Here also was a smaller corral with a feed shed in one corner sheltering a pile of wild hay. As Alda slipped to the ground beside this corral, the stranger dismounted.

"You get along to the cabin an' start a fire," he said. "I'll take care of the broncs."

Alda hesitated, biting her lip. The stranger's intuition was swift. The smile on his lips died. He made as if to remount. "Of course," he said curtly, "if you feel that way about it, I'll drift along. But there is no reason for you to be afraid."

Alda colored hotly. "I'm sorry," she said. "There have been—other men. But I'll have supper ready in a jiffy. You'll find a pole for the saddles and blankets in one corner of the feed shed."

Then she hurried to the cabin. And she took neither saddle bags nor gun with her. . . .

The little stove that had been hauled clear from Missouri was glowing redly and the heat of it spread over the cabin like a benediction. The stranger stood before it, his lean, brown hands opened to the warmth. His slicker and sombrero were put aside. He was a tall, resilient figure, with crisp tawny hair and cool gray

eyes. His twin, black-butted guns now sagged in their holsters from a peg in the wall. He seemed young, almost boyish.

By the light of two candles, Alda was busy over the homemade table. On first entering the cabin she had stoked the stove heavily, then slipped behind the canvas curtain that separated her own sanctuary from the rest of the cabin, stripped, toweled herself to a glow, then donned a simple dress of homespun. Now, with biscuit flour to her elbows and the warmth bringing color to her cheeks, she was alluringly lovely.

"You," the man said quietly, "are Alda Rawlins. I've heard of you. I'm Tracy Hale."

Alda gasped as she spun to face him. "Tracy Hale!"

His swift smile was a little bitter. "Now," he accused gently, "you're afraid."

Alda knew that she should have been afraid. She had heard of Tracy Hale often back when her uncle was alive. Outlaw—cattle-thief—killer!

She stared at him. "I—I don't believe it," she said flatly. "Tracy Hale wouldn't look like you."

He shrugged. "Not the Tracy Hale you've imagined—a picture built up by lies an' gossip. But I am Tracy Hale. I'm sorry I've frightened you."

Quite suddenly Alda knew she wasn't frightened a bit. His eyes were strangely clear and steady and honest. His tawny hair was tousled a trifle, and he looked boyish, young, almost handsome. . . .

Alda laughed softly. "I'm not in the least afraid—truly. You're welcome, Tracy Hale, to my poor hospitality."

ROM then on there was no tension between them. Alda set him to work cutting steaks from a haunch of antelope, while she cooked the biscuits and set the table. They laughed and bantered and joked. Only when they had finished the meal did Tracy Hale become sober and thoughtful. He built a husk cigarette, smoked silently for a moment. Then he looked directly at Alda.

"I don't make a habit of tellin' my troubles," he said gravely. "But this is the first time I've been made actually welcome at anyone's table in years an' I'd like to leave feelin' that at least someone believes I'm not the raw, woolly wolf I'm claimed to be.

"They call me an outlaw, a cattle-thief—a killer. I am, maybe. But I've only taken cattle that were rightfully mine in the first place—an' killed men who would have killed me if I'd have let 'em. That sounds queer, but it's the truth.

"Ten years ago my step-father an' Judd Borman were partners. They owned equal shares in the big Tomahawk spread. Link Darcy—my step-father—got a letter from the East. His sister was sick and needed money. He borrowed some of that necessary money from Judd Borman, his partner, an' gave him an I. O. U. for it. Two months later Link Darcy was found dry-gulched—shot in the back. Borman made a great show of bein' broken up about it, but the lyin' pole-cat wasn't mourning any. Then he claimed he'd have to take over all of Link Darcy's share in the ranch to cover that I. O. U.

"I called Borman on it. My step-father's share in the Tomahawk was worth five times the money he had borrowed from Borman. Deuce Borman was with his father the day I called for a showdown. They got the drop on me an' ran me off the ranch. I told 'em I'd come back an' get Link Darcy's true share of Tomahawk cattle. An' because I've done that, Borman has made an outlaw of me. But I've never lifted my hand against any man but a Tomahawk man, nor have I taken a single head of cattle that didn't carry the Tomahawk brand."

There was a long silence. Alda knew she had heard the truth, because she knew the Bormans, father and son. She felt a swift

surge of sympathy for this lean, tawny-headed figure across the table from her, the young-old man with the shadowed eyes and bitter lips. Impulsively she put out her hand, covering one of his.

"I believe you—every word of it," she said. "I know the Bormans—both of them. Deuce Borman is a beast. I nearly had to shoot him one day when I bumped into him out on the range. And his father isn't much better."

Tracy Hale caught her hand, pressed it swiftly. Then he stood up. "I'll carry the memory of this along a lot of lonely trails," he said gravely. "Thanks—for somethin' that means more to me than you'll ever dream. I'd better be sayin' adios, now."

Alda got to her feet. Outside the wind was roaring with increasing violence. The downpour of the rain was a steady thunder on the roof.

"You're not leaving," she said warmly. "Not in this storm. You can—"

Her words were cut off by the wild and shrill whistle of a horse through the night. Tracy's head jerked up abruptly.

For a moment he was like a statue. Then in a leap he was across the room, lifting down his heavy guns. With swift precision he buckled them about his lean hips. He caught up his hat and slicker. Quickly he blew out the candles. Alda heard the door creak. His voice came to her, soft and drawling, almost caressing.

"Adios, Alda. And thanks. . . ."

Before she could think or move, he was gone.

ALDA would have cried out in protest, but the words caught in her throat. Outside the storm was thundering. Alda pressed herself against the door, trembling. She strained her ears, waiting for some sound of conflict—of shooting. Her heart was fluttering wildly.

Gradually she relaxed. No sound of conflict came. Evidently, by the aid of darkness and storm, Tracy Hale had won clear. Alda fumbled through the darkness, lit one of the candles anew. The yellow glow brought out the familiar, homely interior of the cabin, but to Alda it seemed strangely empty and forlorn. She was alone, and Tracy was gone.

Why were her eyes blurred with tears—why were her lips trembling? It was ridiculous, of course. He was an outlaw, and she had known him but a few short hours. Yet her hand still burned where he had caressed it with his touch.

There was a heavy, clumsy knock at the door. Unthinking, she swung the bar, and the pressure of the wind drove the door against her, sending her staggering back. A hulking figure in gleaming yellow oil-skins lurched in. She saw a brutal, unshaven face. And even the roistering freshness of the wind and rain could not entirely dissipate the reek of whiskey. The newcomer was Deuce Borman.

A wolfish grin split his heavy features as he slammed the door shut and dropped the bar into place. "This," he said thickly, "is somethin' like! Jest you an' me an' a cozy cabin."

He slid out of his oil-skins, then moved suddenly toward her. Stark fear drove the momentary paralysis from Alda's limbs. She dodged him, placed the scant width of the table between them. He cursed. His eyes were like red sparks.

Slowly they circled the table. Alda was trying to think, but her mind was a chaotic jumble. Reflex alone kept her away from him. In a far corner stood Alda's uncle's old Sharps buffalo rifle. Unconsciously she maneuvered toward it. Borman guessed her intent and drove her away from it.

Primitive, blind cunning was at work in the harassed girl. She laughed at Borman, taunting him. She saw the fury grow in him. Again and again he grabbed at her, but always the width of the table thwarted him. In a sudden burst of madness he threw the table out of his way.

It was the moment Alda had been waiting for. Swift as a shadow she sped to the door, caught the bar, flung it aside and threw the door open. But before she could race through it to the sancturay of the storm, Borman's big hand settled on her shoulder. She struggled frantically to free herself, but his remorseless strength drew her back. And then despair broke from her lips in a wild, heart-broken cry.

"Tracy! Tracy Hale!"

It seemed almost a miracle the way that black, storm-ridden night answered her. A lean, dark-slickered figure flashed past her. She heard the sound of a hard-swung fist meeting flesh and bone. The clawing fingers on her shoulder fell away.

Inside the cabin everything was dark. When Borman had over-turned the table, the candle had immediately guttered out on the floor.

Unconscious of the rain which drove through the open door and drenched her, Alda Rawlins stood there, while black madness surged to and fro across the cabin. Borman was gasping and cursing, but Tracy Hale fought silently, a lean, vengeful wolf of a man. Speeding fists thudded against hard flesh. There were straining, panting clinches. The stout little cabin shook on its foundations as the fighters crashed into walls, thudded to the puncheon floor.

Once they were locked together in front of Alda, so close she could have touched them. Then they whirled away, crashing into the far wall. Broken dishes were trampled under foot.

Then a gun-shot crashed loudly. The sudden gust of crimson flame seared Alda's straining eyes, and the acrid smoke choked her. But despite that impact of flame, it seemed to Alda that she had seen a terrible sight. She thought that in that one blinding flash she had seen the lean, silent, tiger figure of Tracy Hale falling to the floor.

Forgetting all else, she sobbed his name and ran forward. Something crashed against the side of her head and the world went spinning out from under her.

CLEAR, sparkling sunlight met Alda Rawlins' eyes when she next opened them. She was lying in her own narrow bunk and the sunlight was coming through the open window above. Her head felt thick and heavy. She touched it and was surprised to find a bandage about it. Abruptly all that had happened through that wild, storm-ridden night came back to her.

She struggled up, throwing aside the blankets that covered her. As she did so, the canvas curtain was lifted and a tall, gaunt, grizzled-headed man stepped into view. Alda swept the blankets about her again, staring. She knew this man. It was Sheriff Bill Venator.

"Feelin' better?" he asked.

She nodded. "What do you want here?" she stammered.

Venator frowned. "My posse is holdin' Tracy Hale outside. He asked me to take another look at you an' see if you were all right. An' he told me, if you were conscious, to tell you not to worry—to forget him."

Alda's pallor deepened. "You—you mean you've arrested Tracy Hale?"

The sheriff nodded. "I was hopin' I'd never have to do it. I know about the kid's private feud with Judd Borman, an', though it can't be proven, I've always felt that Tracy was more than half right. So I haven't strained myself tryin' to corral him. But when he takes to stickin' up Wells-Fargo offices an' killin' the agent, then I got to call a halt. I'm sorry for Tracy—an' I'm sorry for you," he ended gently.

Alda came clear out of the blankets then, drawing one about her. "I don't believe it," she said with surprising calm. "I don't believe Tracy ever robbed any Wells-Fargo office, or killed any agent. He isn't the kind. He wouldn't do that."

There was a glimmer of pity in Bill

Venator's deep, shrewd eyes as he looked at her. Bill had had a daughter one time, slim like this youngster, staunchly clean and fine. Bill cleared his throat.

"The robbery was pulled last night," he said slowly. "Last night, just at dusk. Tom Owens, the agent, was killed. A Mexican saw the hold-up man ridin' for a getaway. He said he was on a big, black hoss. Tracy rides that kind of a hoss."

Alda laughed in sudden relief, her eyes shining. "It couldn't have been Tracy. He was with me at dusk, last night. He helped me drive those cattle into my lower corral, and then he had supper with me. You see, Sheriff—it wasn't Tracy."

Bill Venator stared at her, his eyes cold and searching. She returned the look, unafraid.

"He didn't say that," accused Venator. "He said he only happened along in time to knock hell outa that skunk of a Deuce Borman, an' then take care of you after Borman had hit you on the head with his gun."

"Of course he'd say that," Alda said. "That shows how decent and fine he is. He was thinking of me—thinking what people would say if they heard I had invited Tracy Hale to eat with me and stay in my cabin until the storm was over. But I'm telling you the truth! He was with me at dusk, yesterday. So he couldn't have been in town, robbing anything or anyone."

Bill Venator chewed the drooping ends of his mustache thoughtfully. It was hard not to believe this girl, with her clear, candid eyes. And Tracy Hale would be just that sort of a chivalrous idiot.

Venator turned to go. "I don't know," he muttered. "All I want is to get at the truth of this thing. Five thousand dollars in gold double eagles was taken an' a good man was killed, tryin' to defend it. But I'm glad you've told me what you have, child. I'll see that Tracy gets a fair deal an' a square trial. In the mean time, somethin' else may break. One thing—you don't need to worry about Deuce Borman botherin' you again for some time. Tracy came awful close to beatin' him plumb to death. Adios."

She heard him stamping out. Then the rattle of hoofs sounded and grew dim in the distance. For a long time Alda stood by the bed. Then came the let-down. For despite the assurances of Bill Venator that Trace Hale would get a square deal and a fair hearing, Alda was afraid. She shivered.

Her hopeless eyes ran absently over the cabin. Suddenly they fixed, grew brighter once more. Down there on the littered floor, half hidden under a fragment of broken plate, was a yellowish, metallic glint. She kicked the fragment aside and picked up a gleaming, golden, double eagle, newly minted and sharp.

She fell on her knees, searching. Under the stove she found another and in a shadowy corner, still a third. She began to laugh then.

SHERIFF BILL VENATOR stood in his office, listening to the rumble of angry voices in the lone street of Blaine City. He turned to the two silent, grim-faced deputies who stood beside him.

"I don't like the sound of that," he growled. "Judd Borman, damn his hide, is outside makin' a lot of talk to those fools—tryin' to sell 'em the idea of a lynchin'. You boys take Winchesters an' patrol the street in front of the jail. Bust up any crowd that starts to gather. If Borman gets too salty, tell him to get out of town. For you see, boys—I ain't a damn bit certain that Tracy Hale pulled that hold-up."

The deputies, about to lift down rifles from the rack on the wall, turned and stared at him. "I thought it was a plumb open an' shut case, Bill," one blurted in surprise.

"It ain't," snapped Venator. "Not by a damn sight. I had somethin' told me that's had me thinkin', ever since."

The deputies went out, and soon the uproar in the street lessened.

Fifteen minutes later one of them stuck his head in the office door. "That Rawlins gal is outside an' wants to see you, Bill," he said. "Shall I let her in?"

"Of course," growled Venator.

He held a chair for her when she entered. Alda's eyes were shining and she seemed queerly breathless. With a little gesture of her right hand she dropped three new, gleaming golden double eagles on the top of Venator's scarred desk. "I found those on the cabin floor just after you left," she said.

Venator picked them up, weighing them, staring at them. Then he looked at her. "That stolen money was all in new-minted double eagles. It was for the Indian Reservation at Fort Wasakie. Girl, you've put a rope around Tracy Hale's neck. An' I thought you—"

Alda surprised him by laughing. "Two men fought in my cabin last night, Sheriff Bill—two of them. Tracy did not lose that money during the fight—but the other one did."

Venator stiffened as though some one had pushed a gun muzzle against the back of his neck. For a moment he was absolutely still. Then he brought a thundering fist down upon the desk. "By George!" he exclaimed. "That could be it! After all, there's lots of black horses!"

He stood up, put a fatherly arm about Alda's shoulders and hugged her. "Youngster," he said, "I'm proud of you. You were thinkin' faster than I was. I forgot that you were a woman, fightin' for the man—"

"I love," broke in Alda, her eyes shining. "That's right, Sheriff Bill. It seems that I have been waiting all my life for him."

She was unashamed, vibrant, honest. Bill Venator laughed happily. "You keep right on lovin' him, honey. He's worth it! You stay right here—I got business ahead."

He called his two deputies to him, asked them a guarded question. One of them nodded toward the saloon across the street.

JUDD BORMAN and his son Deuce were at the bar. Deuce was saying nothing, for his face was puffed and bruised and cut and swollen. Only his eyes were the same, red as sparks—brutal and vengeful.

Judd Borman was talking fast and loose. "There ain't no use waitin' for this thing to come to court," he bellowed. "How d'we know that Venator won't go to sleep on the job an' let Hale escape? I vote we lynch him an' make sure."

"Easy does it, Borman," sounded Venator's voice. "You'll talk yourself plumb off this green earth one of these days unless you watch yourself. Suppose you dry up an' let me do a little talkin'. Deuce—" his voice snapped like a whip—"jest where were you last night at dusk?"

Deuce Borman spun around to face Venator, and his eyes widened in a way that made Bill Venator nod slowly. Venator's gun jumped from the holster, the muzzle bearing on Deuce Borman's stomach. "I'm telling you to empty your pockets on the top of the bar, Deuce," growled Venator. "Empty all of them—of everythin'."

Deuce Borman ran his tongue over swollen, raw lips. "What is this?" he blurted. "A hold-up?"

"No!" rasped Venator. "The hold-up was pulled last night—an' that's why I intend to see what kind of money you got in your pocket."

Judd Borman had been motionless. His right side was toward Venator. Very slightly he edged around, his left hand moving downward. One of Bill Venator's deputies spoke, almost apologetically.

"Don't try it, Judd—'less you want to miss the middle joint of your backbone."

The elder Borman froze, his lips writh-

ing soundlessly. But he put both hands, palm downward, on the top of the bar.

"An' now, for the last time, I want to see what's in your pockets, Deuce," said Venator evenly. "Shell out, or I shell 'em out for you."

There was no denying the chill purpose in Bill Venator's eyes. Deuce Borman shrugged and dropped his hands towards his overall pockets. But suddenly his right hand flashed back up, a clenched fist now. It caught Bill Venator under the angle of the jaw, spilling him sideways from the bar. And young Borman's left hand was dragging at his gun.

Bill Venator, dazed, floundering, fired one shot as he was falling to the floor. Deuce took the shot through the body. He gasped, once, then went down.

Judd Borman leaped back, also dragging at his guns. But a hard-swung barrel of a big Peacemaker Colt caught him under the ear and he went down supinely.

A moment later, after ransacking the pockets of the two men on the floor, Bill Venator laid a round dozen golden double eagles on the bar. Every coin was bright and new. Venator looked around the silent, wondering room.

"That's it, gents," he said curtly. "That is part of the loot stolen in the hold-up last night. We've all seen double eagles before, but we don't see many new ones in these parts. They've generally had a lot of use before they reach here. If Deuce Borman had had nothin' to hide, he'd have shelled out an' never started trouble. Deuce Borman is the man who pulled that hold-up an' killed Tom Owens. I got some of those coins from Judd Borman's pockets, so he musta been in on it, too."

Bill Venator went out then and headed straight back to his office. The grimness of his features faded as he looked down into Alda's eager brown eyes.

"You win, honey. Deuce Borman was the man."

"And Tracy?" begged Alda.

"He's goin' loose, of course," said Venator, reaching for his keys.

A minute later Alda Rawlins was looking again at the lean, tawny-headed man who was in her heart. He came to her, took her hands in his. "Bill told me—what you did," he said softly. "Why?"

She couldn't answer him; her heart was choking her. Tracy Hale laughed softly and took her in his arms, then and there.

"Was I you young folks," drawled Venator, "I wouldn't waste no time. Life is short enough at best—an' powerful uncertain. It's gettin' on toward dinner time an' I reckon you'll find old Judge Allard home. An' after that, I'd sorta hunt a new trail. The West is wide, youngsters—an' lots of it is sweeter country than this."

Tracy looked at him over Alda's brown head. "You've called the turn, Bill."

* * *

An old weather-worn prairie schooner creaked jauntily out toward the sunset, over a land that had grown green in a night. Lashed to the tailboard, a battered little stove that had journeyed clear from Missouri was seeking a new home, still farther west. There were many other things in that wagon—the entire furnishings of a humble little cabin which now brooded in emptiness on the bank of Apache Creek.

Balanced easily on the swaying seat, Alda Hale handled the reins deftly. Out ahead, being hazed into the sunset glow, was a little herd of cattle. The man who drove them was tall and lean, with tawny hair and a gleaming smile.

He turned in the saddle and waved to Alda. She waved back, her eyes shining, her lips parted breathlessly.

She saw him spur his horse, to head off a straggler of the herd. His cry came back to her, undulating on the clear, sweet prairie breeze:

"Get along, lil' dogies. . . ."

♥ HEADING YOUR WAY ♥

Rangeland Preview

Alone on her ranch, Nell O'Day dreamed of the moment the right guy would come by. But she was taking no chances. When the good-looking stranger rode up, she quickly hauled out her shotgun. . . .

It was a hard, lonesome life Nell lived—especially with neighbors like tough Colonel Van Dyke and his uppity daughter Doris pestering her. But her troubles sure didn't show any on saucy, red-lipped Nell. . . .

The stranger's name was Bart Sawyer. He was sort of raggedy—but nice, too. "I brought something to deliver to you," he said. Then he blushed, grabbed her—and kissed her until she just had to like it!

Bart took Nell's part when the Colonel got nasty—but Nell didn't like the way he looked at sultry Doris. . . . Art Lawson tells their romantic tale next issue in "Saddle-Tramp's Girl," published May 2nd.

DUDE IN HER

Thrilling Cow-Country Romance

With downright horror
range-bred Gail discovered—
she was that way 'bout a dude!

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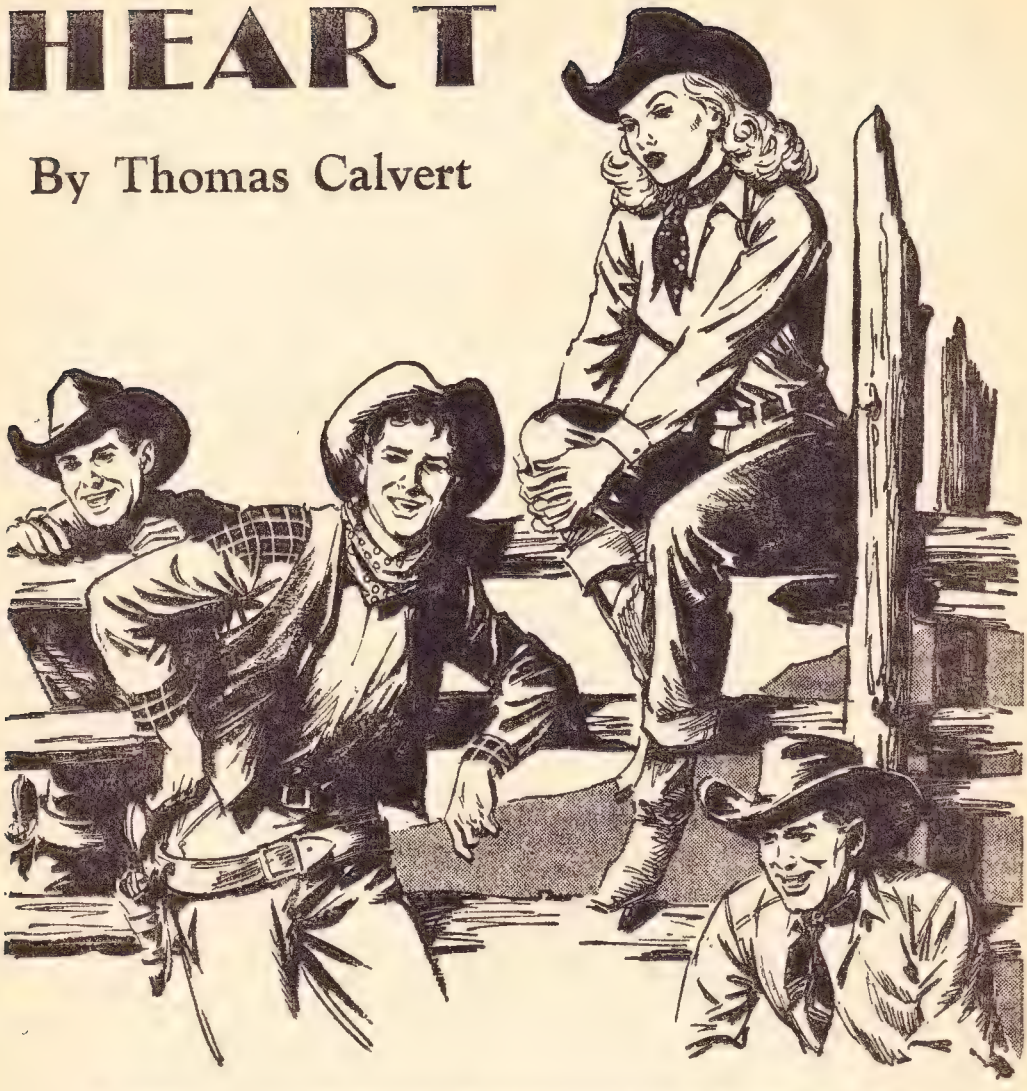
HEART

By Thomas Calvert



While the boys laughed, she gave him one unmerciful glare, as if he had betrayed her.

CHAPTER ONE

Drifter's Serenade

THE music was very faint at first, like the memory of winds singing through the mountain pines. And then it came louder and nearer, rising and falling, drifting down-trail to Gail. It was mouth-organ music, sweet and melancholy and tender, and filled with an immense restless loneliness, like the towering Rockies down which it came.

Gail sat on the steps of the ranch house, listening, and the light violet of her eyes filled with the shadows of hungry yearnings. The music brought a stirring within her breast. Emotions swept through her, silent and dark and deep, as a full river sweeps through deep-grassed meadows in the night.

She sat there listening to the poignant

wail, and she thought, It's a drifter's music. But not the kind that drift in here. This one's been blown loose from his herd, and he's just stumbling on in front of a line storm.

Gail was twenty years old, and she knew her mind and she knew her heart. She knew that up to now, her heart had been almost empty, and suddenly, it seemed achingly full. It was filled with the sad, restless wail of that music. She closed her eyes, wondering if the man would be like his music; if he could possibly be different.

Then he rode down the trail, uncannily small against the piled immensity of the Rockies. She watched his approach with a perplexed frown. Something about him was not right. She realized with a start that it was because he could not ride. He could stay on his horse, but he was no horseman.

He rode up, stiff as a board, and touched his worn Stetson. "Howdy, ma'am," he said. "I was wondering if I could get some water?"

From that single act, she knew he was an Easterner and a dude. A Westerner would have waited for the offer of water.

She nodded and said, "Light a spell, mister, if you're so minded."

He had a serious, thoughtful face, and a flicker of gratitude broke over it as he climbed stiffly from his horse. He said, "I'm sure obliged. My horse is kind of saddle-sore. He could stand a rest."

The girl grinned and asked, "The horse, or you?"

He looked uncomfortable, and then grinned back, small lines fanning out from the corners of serious brown eyes. For that instant, their laughing eyes met and held. She realized for the first time that he was young, probably not more than twenty-four. They laughed straight into each other's eyes. Then suddenly his look darkened, and he dropped his gaze.

She had the sharp thought that, somehow, he didn't think he was good enough to laugh with her, and that it had been a long time since he had laughed much with anyone.

She watched him leading his horse toward the pond, and curiosity and disappointment mingled in her. He was tall; with some beef on his frame, he could be broad and solid. He had long legs, and the straight, clean stride of a walking man. She thought she liked his stride and the stiffness of his back, but they'd be very unpopular in a horse country.

Then she thought whimsically that it really didn't matter, because it wasn't in a girl such as herself to like a dude. Yet she watched him out of sight, realizing that he was really badly trail-sored. His stride must have been painful to him, and he had only kept from hobbling out of pride. She liked that part of him, and she sat with her elbow on her knee, her small chin in her hand, and a speculative look in her eyes.

AINEY, the foreman, jangled across from the saddle-house, stopping with one heel resting on the upper step. He rolled a cigarette, his eyes narrowed and curious upon the spot where the stranger had disappeared.

He stood a distance down the gallery from the girl, and from the tail of her eye she measured him against the newcomer. She noted the toughness of his range-bred body, and the way his compact muscles were solid and tight against his dusty clothes. His hands were hard and square and powerful. His jaw was like an anvil, and there was something about his eyes that was quiet, and dangerous as the devil.

"Who's the hombre, Gail?" he asked.

"Dunno," she said casually. "Some drifting dude."

"Sure announced himself plenty," Rainey murmured with disapproval. "Like to started a stampede, was there a herd around."

"Go on!" she laughed. "You been try-

ing to get music out of a piece of paper and a comb for ten years!" Her eyes snapped up at him with mischief. "You ever hear tell what a comb's really for, Rainey?"

His lips compressed upon his cigarette. He said grittily, "It was a bad day when you grew too big to wallop." He glowered in the direction the dude had gone. "Reckon I better mosey down and keep him from driving his horse through the whole pond."

He came back, chuckling, after a time. He said, "You hear tell of any dance hereabouts tonight?"

"No," she answered. "Why?"

"The dude's taking a bath!" he guffawed. "With soap!"

She sniffed aloofly. "I think that's very nice! A few others around here might cotton to the same idea."

He stood with his legs braced solidly apart, and looked down at her, and the grin went off his face. He stood with his strong fists against his hips, watching her, and a leaden flatness came into his eyes. He said, "Don't be getting any ideas about dudes, lady!"

"Why, the nerve of you, Rainey Green! I'll get any ideas I want about anyone, anytime!" she flashed hotly. "Except you!" she added with scorn.

A muscle worked along his jaw, and then was still. He gave a sharp nod of his head. "All right, if that's the way you want it!" He wheeled savagely, and stalked to the corral. Shortly, he beat dust for the range.

Her father stood behind her on the steps, his bleached eyes narrowed against the bright yellow glare. He watched Rainey dust off, noting the way he quirted his horse. He asked, "What's wrong, Gail?"

The swell of the stranger's harmonica burst from down near the pond. The music was merry and lively now, and yet held that undernote, that melancholy, restless wail. She looked up at her father fondly and answered, "That's what's wrong."

Her father grinned after Rainey's settling dust, and pulled his chin. He said, "Reckon that might annoy him, considering the kind of noise he makes out of a comb." His gaze went toward the dark clump of pines that hid the pond. "We could use some music," he said. "If the stranger ain't got the Injun sign on him, tell him to light a spell. I'll send out for the boys to ride in."

The stranger came back, clean and fresh, and sat on a step of the veranda, down a way. He played at random, the music drifting down the valley. He said abruptly, "My name's Gil Mason."

His voice was like his music, with undernotes that pierced inside her breast and made her ache. She said, "You're a long piece from home, Gil."

He looked out at the green mountains that piled into snow caps that met the skies. He nodded. "Yes. A long, long way."

She looked at him curiously. But he was silent, and she let it go at that. She told herself it didn't matter. It could be murder or horse-stealing or just plain restlessness that drove him on. It didn't matter, because she could never like a dude. But she took a long time prettying up for supper.

CHAPTER TWO

Trial of Manhood

HE WAS on the veranda with her father when she came out. She was dressed now in calico that fitted snugly to her lithe young body, showing her curves and small waist. A light came into her father's eyes.

He said, "Living picture of your mother, Gail."

It left an opening for the stranger to speak a decent word. But he looked at her almost darkly and said nothing. A hot flush stole down her neck, and she turned quickly to see to things in the kitchen.

She thought, Darn him! He may have known Eastern belles. But I'm no turnip!

She thought ragingly of ways to devil him, but her plans came to naught. After supper the boys drifted in from the range. They heaped logs in the firepit out in front and sat around, and the stranger played. He played the lively pieces, and then drifted into the homely, sad ones that wrung those tough hearts of the range. He played for the men, and his music talked. It told them of their mothers and sweethearts, and of the things they might have been, but weren't. He played for them, until one puncher got up and cussed, and moved away into the dark.

Then he played across the lowering flames to Gail alone. The music swelled and faded and throbbed within her veins. It told her about himself and that long, weary trail. It told her that he could love her, but for some reason he did not dare. The music tore at her heart, and her throat grew full and aching.

Moonlight fell in a silver veil across her bed, and she lay beneath it, looking out at the shining peaks of the great mountains, and wondering if Gil Mason was what she had been waiting for; if this was the thing Rainey could never give her. Tremulous with questions and uncertainty, she wondered what part of Gil's past drove him along an endless trail; what thing it was that would not allow him to stop, nor even to tell a girl he loved her.

She had thought nobody noticed her eyes shining in the dark the night before. But after breakfast, her father came around and gave her a hug. He stood with his arm around her shoulders for a long moment. Then he said, with embarrassment, "Just remember, music doesn't run a ranch, Gail."

She colored and bit her lip, and said quickly, "I hadn't thought it might."

"It's a downright shame it don't," her father said. "Anybody that can play like that's got something to 'im. But that don't mean he's got what it takes to bring up cows."

She murmured defensively, "A man could learn to ride and rope."

Her father nodded. "Sure he could. I was a greenhorn myself when I started." He cleared his throat and moved to the window. "It's not that."

"It's guts?" she asked.

He turned around and looked at her uneasily. He said, "There's different kinds of innards, and maybe he's got plenty. But it takes a particular tough kind to ride the range."

She looked at her plate with tempestuous melancholy choking her inside.

Her father said, "Dang it, what's wrong with Rainey?"

"I don't know, Pa," she answered. She gave a little expressive motion of her hands. "It's just—just that he doesn't make me feel anything!"

"He's a good cowman," her father said. "He's a clean shooter, and he thinks a heap of you." He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He said, "Well, we'll feed this drifter up for a few days, anyway. But don't go getting unhappy over him."

He turned and went out the door. She sat there, staring at her plate, understanding and loving her father, and knowing he was right. And still wondering how she could ever marry Rainey, now that her trail had crossed with Gil's.

SHE heard the boys whooping it up down by the corral, and she wandered out to see the fun. They had burred some fresh-broken mustangs, and they were riding high and raking leather. She climbed to a top bar and sat there watching, a horsewoman's excitement shining in her eyes. Butch Henderson's saddle girth let go, and Butch, saddle and all, went sailing through the air like a leaf in a high wind. He climbed to his feet with a wry face, answering the kidding he was in for.

Rainey watched her with a speculative gaze from across the corral. Shortly, he

dropped to the ground, and stood there teetering on his heels. He said, "I reckon it's my turn, boys. Bring on a tough one."

"And how!" Butch grinned, and cinched a killer into the chute.

The boys were laughing, but it was a different kind of laughter. Gail felt the impact of their respect for Rainey as the gate went up. He came out, yelling fiercely, riding high and clean, and raking the killer's shoulders with his spurs. The killer bucked and sunfished and tried every trick he knew, and Rainey was still riding high. He glanced over at her, pride and bitterness both clear upon his face. And in that instant, the killer threw him.

Rainey rolled and was on his feet like a cat. He climbed up from the dust, out from under the killer's hoofs. When she could see his face again, his eyes were fiery with rage. He was rubbing his shoulder, but in an absent way, and she guessed the things he was muttering to himself.

Butch said, "What are ya beefin' about, Rainey? You stuck that killer three minutes. That would be ridin', in any rodeo."

Rainey snapped savagely, "This is no rodeo! Pen that mustang up, and I'll break him right or kill him this evenin'!"

That was horse language, and Gail smiled across at him. But not with love. Rainey knew it, and his eyes turned from fire to lead. He looked around at the dude.

"You feel like tryin'?" he inquired in a flat voice that was a challenge.

Gail watched Gil's face tighten and turn gray. He shot her a swift glance and licked his lips. He got down slowly from the bars and stood facing Rainey. He said, "I'm not much at high-riding, but maybe you tired him out. I'll try."

Rainey stared at him. "*Maybe I tired him out?*" he repeated. He threw back his head with a roar of contemptuous laughter. "Brother, you think we aim to murder you on this ranch? Nope, we'll give you a nice, respectable horse. Even a dude ought to be able to stick his leather."

He turned, grinning darkly, and ordered out a horse a ranch child could have ridden. Gil stood there, his face dark with shame. He watched them burr the horse, and noted the surprise in the mild animal's eyes. He didn't know much about horseflesh, but he guessed this one would never see eight years again. He knew the insult, and he knew something else, even before the animal's mild bucking sent him hurtling through the air.

He knew this was just one more stop on the endless trail. One more thing at which he had failed.

He hit the dust hard. Dazedly thinking of what Rainey had done, he rolled as quickly as he was able. But he rolled the wrong way. The old horse gave him a few random kicks as he started to his feet. It sent him sprawling against the corral bars.

He got up, trying to meet their contempt good naturedly. His gaze went across to Gail. White and tense, she was sitting there with trembling lips and brimming eyes. She gave him one unmerciful glare, as if he had betrayed her, and dropped from the bar to run into the house. He looked after her with weary melancholy. Shortly, he climbed through the corral and wandered down to the pond.

He was squatting there, drawing aimlessly in the dust, when the Old Man came up and asked, "You hurt any?"

He said, "Nope," and got to his feet. "Reckon I'm no hand at riding," he added with embarrassment.

The Old Man grinned and watched him with contemplative eyes. "You ain't too almighty good," he said. "But maybe you could learn." He stood there, studying Gil. He asked abruptly, "You were goin' to ride the killer if they gave him to you?"

Gil shrugged ruefully. "What can a guy do?"

"Ummmm," the Old Man nodded. "Sometimes he can try. And then sometimes he can get killed. You'd have got killed." He looked out toward the range

country, to the north. "What do you aim to do now?" he asked.

"Reckon I'll hit the trail," Gil said. "I'm obliged for the victualing."

"Don't be thanking me yet," the Old Man growled. "You can't hit the trail the way your horse is. He needs three, four days of resting up them sores, or you're going to end up about a hundred and fifty miles out in those mountains with a dead animal under you."

"I ought to be earning my keep," Gil said.

The Old Man scratched his head. He said, "You already earned it with that music. You can sure ride that harmonica, anyhow! There was one tune there that Gail's mother used to like a lot." He stopped and blew his nose, and then snapped gruffly, "But if it makes you feel better, you can ride out to the near range and give the boys some music. Take the old horse that threw you."

"Fair enough," Gil nodded, and stood wondering if the horse was more amiable when it was not burred.

THE Old Man went into the house and talked to Gail's stiff back. He said, "Danged if I can figure if that fellow's plain dumb, or just loco, or if he's got something to him!"

"You were right this morning!" she said edgedly. "Why, Pa, the Chink cook could ride that horse!"

"Sure," her father agreed. "But he didn't know he was going to get that horse, when he took up Rainey. He thought he was going to ride the same killer."

She swerved around, her eyes dark and hurt, but now filling with uncertain lights. "You're changing the way you think, Pa?"

"I dunno," he said perplexedly. "I dunno if he's got any grit or not. Too danged bad there ain't a way to prove a man when he can't stay on a horse."

"He'll be leaving, anyway," she said hollowly. "The boys would laugh him off the place."

"He can't leave for three, four days yet," her father answered. "His pony's all sored up. I'm sending him out to the near range. The boys out there didn't see this happen."

The dude had been on range three days, leaving a throbbing silence where his music had rippled through Gail's heart. She told herself, "I'll forget him! It was only his music. He doesn't mean a thing to me!"

But she kept wondering if he thought of her. And light shadows had formed beneath her violet eyes.

Her father paused on the way through the living room, noting her tense attitude from the corner of his eye. He said, half to himself, "Well, I reckon tomorry, day after, the dude can ride. Get him a good grub bag together."

Her hands stopped abruptly for an instant; they felt like ice. Then she was busily dusting the place she had dusted three times before. She said, "All right, Pa. He riding in for his last night?"

"No," her father said. "I'd right like to hear him again, but he's twenty miles along the trail out there. Might as well send his horse out to him."

The jangle of spurs mixed with the slap of chaps, and hard steps tapped across the gallery. Rainey knocked and came in before he was bidden, in a black rage.

"What d'ya think *now?*" he demanded.

"Stampede?" the Old Man asked quickly.

"Stampede ain't nothin'!" Rainey gritted. "That spavined, galled groundhog of a dude's got the boys to drinking milk!"

He stood with his legs apart, his fists on his hips, and his deep chest thrust out pugnaciously. He glared at them both in turn.

"Ain't that somethin'?" he demanded. "Lazy L hands drinkin' baby food on their own range!"

The Old Man wiped his mouth to cover his grin. He asked, "Uh . . . where they gettin' milk, Rainey?"

"Where?" Rainey almost howled. "Out of a can where it ought to come from? Not on your life! This hombre found himself a cow what done lost her calf, and he's been milkin' her!"

Little tendrils of excitement shot through Gail. She shot her father a glance and saw that the same thought was on his mind.

He drawled curiously, "What the boys doing, Rainey? Roping her for each milking?" He looked at his foreman shrewdly. "Never heard tell of a wild beef that liked to be treated like barnyard stock."

Rainey gritted, "No, they ain't ropin' her!" The cussing he did not express was as clear as day. "He made love to her!" he rasped.

"He what?" the Old Man demanded.

"I'm tellin' you by the book!" Rainey said. "He done serenaded that cow with that mouth organ of his'n. He done kidded her into thinkin' he's her calf and the bull rolled into one. She moos after him like he was the old man of the damn herd!"

Gail watched the temper throbbing along Rainey's corded neck, and suppressed her laughter. Rainey glared at her dancing eyes. He rasped, "I suppose that's the way to wrangle cows now? By creepers, next thing we'll be wearin' horns on our heads and leadin' the herds on all fours!"

"Well, he'll be hitting the trail soon," the Old Man said.

"Can't be too soon for me!" Rainey rumbled. He jammed on his hat and wheeled out the door. "Milk!" he muttered furiously as he left. "Lord help us when the outfits hear that at roundup!"

The Old Man looked after him and let go with a hearty chuckle. He looked at Gail. He said, "You ever hear tell of the time Rainey tried to quiet the herd down with that comb of his, and danged near started a roarin' stampede? Gosh, it was funny!"

He took his hat off a peg and stood considering. He said, "Reckon you better take the dude's horse and grub bag out to him. If I send Rainey out with it, he'll put poison in it!"

Eagerness and fear were mixed in the girl. She stood at the door against the dusty golden light, looking up toward the near range, and feeling the pounding of her pulse. She thought desperately, I don't know anything about him! It's just his music did this to me. What good's just music on a ranch? What good would he be around here?

CHAPTER THREE

Castaways of the Storm

GAIL packed the grub bag, packed it full enough to last Gil on a trail to the Atlantic. She got his horse and gear, and rode out into the mid-morning light.

She came on the chuck wagon in the narrow valley below the herd. The cook grinned at her sheepishly. He said, "We got somethin' kind o' new here," and handed her a dipper of cool, fresh milk.

"The chief bull," he said, "is up on that grazing with the boys. I'll hobble his horse, if you want to ride up."

She knew she shouldn't ride up there. She knew she ought to just let him drift along, with the memory of his music floating back down the trail. She stilled the tremors within her and set her lips. She decided determinedly that was exactly what she would do. And then she rode up onto the grazing, the deep, lush grass that grew along the mountainside.

The big herd was there, fanned out across the mountain. The boys were loafing, hilariously engaged in teaching Gil how to use a rope. He had succeeded so far in throwing himself twice. He achieved this unusual performance a third time when the girl rode up. He sat in the dust, his own legs hogtied, and looked up foolishly into her eyes.

He said, with rather desperate restraint,

"I'll get it yet, Gail. Every man's got to learn."

She said, "Yes, Gil," and the mirth went out of her as a cloudburst vanishes into a sandy sink. She listened to the whooping laughter of the boys, and she knew the riding Gil must have taken. And still he had stuck and was taking it with that quiet determination to learn.

He was untangling himself clumsily, and she looked down on his back with a strange, aching tenderness twining about her heart. She looked at the way the shaggy, chestnut hair curled along the back of his neck, and noted his close-set ears. He looked up suddenly and he gave a grin. By criminy, she thought, he might not be able to give it, but he could sure take it standing!

It brought a hard, hot lump into her breast. She turned away, and gazed up at the immense mountains that reached above grass, and above timber, with their snow and ice jutting into the cobalt sky.

The boys drifted away, chuckling, and Gil got untangled and to his feet. He stood looking at her uneasily, in silence. He murmured, "It's sure nice to see you here." The words came low, like a thought he had not meant to speak.

She looked down at him with a swift widening of her eyes and a sudden pounding of her blood. He met her gaze for a brief instant, and that restless loneliness was in his eyes, as clear as in his music. It struck barbs to her heart, and she leaned forward and rubbed her quirt behind her horse's ear.

She said, with a desperate attempt at calm, "I brought out your horse and some grub, Gil."

He said, "Oh," and looked quickly at the ground. He said slowly, "You folks sure been right nice to me. I'd have liked the chance to tell your pa."

"I'll tell him," she murmured. And then she looked around at him with savage heat, and gritted, "No, I won't! I don't know why I should! We've behaved like you were a—a galled horse that had to be put out to pasture!"

He looked up at her with serious concern. He said, "Don't feel that way. I been learnin' a lot out here." He forced a smile, and nodded at a bluff above him. "Playing, too. This is a right handsome place for music. Kind of floats out over the valley at night and just hangs there, if you play from up on that rock."

She glanced up to where he nodded. She said, "That's Enchanted Rock. The Injun braves used to take their squaws up there for the Gods to see the night they married."

"That right?" he asked. "I got to make me up a song about that before I hit the trail." He cleared his throat and tried to look unconcerned. "There's a cabin on the shelf behind it," he said.

She nodded. "That's the halfway on the short cut to the spring range. Sometimes if there are cloudbursts up the mountains, you can't get through until the brooks run down."

He looked up at the rock and murmured, "Sunset's sure mighty pretty up there." His glance met the deep violet of her intense, wide eyes.

He darkened and scowled and glanced quickly away. "I meant—" he faltered. "Well, I was just thinkin' of last sundown. I was up there, and it was sure pretty."

She leaned over from her horse, and she made him look up into her face. Her voice was low and deep, and it was no longer a girl's voice. It was a woman's. She said, "Gil, I want to ride up to Enchanted Rock for sunset, and hear you play that piece."

He looked uneasy. He said, "I dunno what the boys'll think."

She said, "They won't think wrong, if they know what's good for them!"

"You're the boss," he muttered, and tried not to let the happiness in his eyes show too plainly.

E GOT his browsing horse and they rode up into the hills. They came across the deep-banked brook behind the shelf and hobbled their horses, then walked out and sat upon the rock.

They sat silent for a time, locked together by the heaviness of their thoughts. Beneath them, the cows were being herded down from the mountainside into the valley. The calls of the punchers drifted up, sharp in the clear air, but distant, and no part of their private world. The valley went into shadow, green, then deepening blue, then purple that turned to sable. They watched the tiny flicker of the chuck fire far below. The beat of the supper iron came like a small silver tinkle to their ears.

She said, "It's evening down there already, Gil. And it's still day up here. It's funny how two worlds so close together can be so far apart."

He gazed down broodingly and nodded. "I guess that's it. I've always been trying to ride the trail like this was one world. But there are a lot of worlds together. I just haven't hooked onto my own."

"You will," she murmured.

"I dunno," he said doubtfully. "I aim to. But then something always happens, and there's the trail, and always another hill to cross."

"Why don't you light some place a spell?" she asked.

He gave her one swift glance, filled with bitterness. The single note of a sharp laugh came from his throat. He said, "Never found but one place I wanted to light, and I wasn't much use there."

The hurt in him stabbed her like searing shots. Unthinking, her hand went out to his. Their fingers twined, and she felt the warmth and strength and tenderness flowing from his hand. A vast melancholy filled her. She thought of her father and the ranch. She thought that this was a man she could love and cling to—if only he were a cowman.

They sat like that, thinking their private thoughts, and watched the sky become streaked purple and orange and red. High above, the clouds were edged with gold. The pastel spokes of sunset rolled across the icy peaks above. In the valley it was night, and the quieting sound of the cows mixed distantly with the lulling songs of the riders. Suddenly, it was night in their world too, with the stars near, blanketing the sky above the clouds. It turned cool, and without thought, they moved close to the warmth of each other.

He gave her small hand one hard squeeze that wrung the very core of her life. He said, "I'll be riding at sunup."

He unlocked his hand gently, tapped his mouth organ, and began to play. Plaintive and melancholy, filled with a clinging, tender ardor, the notes swelled like waves, and drifted down into the valley. The music went out like slow ripples across a still pool, but within her breast it pulled with the power of an undertow, carrying her down into an aching misery.

He stopped playing the known pieces and said softly, "Maybe it went like this."

Then he played something no man had ever heard before. It was clear and vibrant and filled with a sharp, clean love. It was the haunting call of an Indian brave to a maid. And he played for the girl alone.

Clouds obscured the stars, and still he played. He was playing when the first thunder rolled above them in the mountains, and the rain dumped down on them as if from a bucket.

Gail said quickly, awakening from a dream, "The cabin!"

They jumped to their feet and ran for shelter. Gil made a fire and then went out to put the horses in the leaky shed. There was coffee and a few supplies, and as she began making supper, her eyes were full of a poignant happiness. Looking into the flames, she smiled, yet nearly cried. For he had made the fire for her first, and that might mean searching the whole tangle of

the shelf to find the horses. No range man would think of a girl first while stock was roaming loose.

He came back and squatted in front of the fire to eat. She watched the rivulets of water drain out of his hair and make little zigzag streams over his serious face. The rain slowed into a steady patter upon the roof. He got up and went out and was gone for a long time. He came back soaked.

He said, "The brook's running a flood. I don't think we can risk it in the dark."

She laughed gently. "Not in the dark or in the day," she told him. "Not when it's raining above in the mountains!"

He stood there looking perplexed and mad, and muttered, "Looks like I got you in for something. We'll have to camp here."

She said, "Let me worry about all that."

"No," he growled. "It was my doing." He looked around and there were four bunks and blankets, and enough food. He looked straight at her. The fire showed the faint color on her cheeks, she sat with her shoulders very straight and tensed. But her eyes were wide and level, and filled with the pathos of parting.

She said, "It's all right, Gil."

An unhappy smile flashed across his face, and passed. He stooped over her, and she felt the swift, warm brush of his lips. For an instant, her hands froze together. Then her arms moved to encircle his neck.

But Gil was standing upright, and had moved back a step. He said, "I got my own blanket outside." He gave her a long melancholy look, and went out the door.

She gave a tremulous, jerky little laugh, feeling the mad chaos of emotions storm through her. She sat and waited for him to come back, listening to the crackling of the fire, and beat of rain upon the roof. The fire burned down to embers. She threw on another log, and that burned down, and suddenly she was conscious he did not mean to come back. She sat thinking that probably no other man on the range would have acted that way after what she had done, and she put her head on her arm and cried with a gnawing love and bitter happiness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hearts in Stampede

A BEATING stream of sunlight wakened her. She opened her eyes, and smelled coffee and bacon. She found she was covered and on a bunk, and she sat up, wondering how she had got there.

Gil looked up from the fireplace and said apologetically, "The door banged open in the night. When I came to close it, you were asleep at the table. I hope you don't mind that I moved you."

She smiled adoringly and said, "No Gil," and then was acutely conscious of how she must look. She went down to the stream and tidied up, and came back and they had breakfast. He was silent, and in the cold light of day, she did not blame him. There was going to be some tall explaining to do.

He said, "I'll be saddling up," and went out the door.

She was breaking the fire when Rainey's voice floated in and struck her like a slap in the face. His voice was low and flat and grim. He said, "By hell, I'll kill you, Mason!"

That was all he said. There was the smash of a fist driving into flesh.

She raced out and saw Gil with blood shooting from his nose. There was no fight in his eyes, only a weary acceptance. He put up his guard perfunctorily.

She cried, "Rainey!"

Without turning, the foreman said, "Keep still! I aim to beat this hombre into pulp."

His voice was murderously quiet and hard. She knew that nothing she could say would stop the fight. It was range country, and it took a man's fists or his guns to settle things like this. She stood

there watching helplessly, her heart a riot of distress.

There was cold manslaughter in Rainey's heart, and he began a systematic beating that ripped through Gil's guard and battered his face to pieces. Five times Rainey knocked him down, the murder in him increasing every time the dude got to his feet. Gil lashed out occasionally, but without spirit. He was being slowly beaten to death.

"Gil!" the girl cried in agony. "For heaven's sake, *fight!*"

He glanced over at her from a swollen eye. Then he nodded as if to himself, and in that instant he came charging in. He was no match for Rainey in strength. But the fight was in him now, and suddenly it showed that once he had known how to fight. He slashed open Rainey's mouth, ripped an eye, smashed in a blow to the heart that sent Rainey staggering back, cursing.

The expression in Rainey's eyes turned to a sharp, diamond light. He caught wind and his lips widened into a killing grin. He gritted, "That's more like it. Now I got something to fight!"

He jumped forward, closing in with the power of an avalanche. His muscles bulged against his clothes. He had no art of fighting, but he was tough as jerked beef and strong as a bull. He took his punches without wincing, and his knotty fists battered back for more. He drove through Gil's guard with smashing hatred, and sank a blow that would have felled an ox.

Gil staggered, his arms going to his sides. He stared haggardly for a moment, his mouth gaping open. Then he keeled onto his back with a thin gray pallor spreading over his face.

Rainey stood over him, breathing hard, and wiped blood from his own features. He said, "I didn't think he had it in him. It'll make him worth killing when he comes to!"

Gail cried bitterly, "There's no fairness in what you've done! You against a dude!"

"There's no fairness in what he done, either!" Rainey gritted.

She looked him squarely in the eye. Her voice was suddenly level and deadly earnest. She said, "Rainey, he slept with the horses!"

A harsh laugh tore from Rainey's throat. He said, "I'll believe that . . ."

He stopped sharply, his gaze on Gil's boots. They were dark with wetness, and small drops of water were pressing from under one welt and running slowly down the sole. He turned and looked at Gail's boots, and they were dry. Turning back and studying Gil again, he gave a muffled curse and looked at the girl. The murder washed from his face, and he showed plain, simple rage.

He gritted, "Lord! I can't even get me a reason to kill a man!"

She gave a weary sigh. She said, "Forget it. He's hitting the trail this morning."

He stared at her unbelievingly. He demanded, "What for? You think enough of the man to come up here with him. What are you letting him ride off for?"

"You can't raise cows with music, Rainey. You can't hold the range when another man can lick you."

He scowled down at his bloody knuckles, rubbing the other hand across them. He said with infuriated puzzlement, "That's the way it's always been. A licked man rides off the range." He looked up at her with grim rage. "I beat that hombre silly. But I ain't sure I licked him!"

She looked down at Gil with a sad smile, and wiped soft tears from her cheeks. She laid a cold, nerveless hand on Rainey's shoulder. She gave way to one jerking sigh that left her quiet, without any emotion whatever.

She said, "We better go now. A man doesn't want company when he comes to, the way he is."

He nodded. "That's right." He cocked an eye at the sky, studying the clouds. He said in his normal voice, "Thunder storm coming up, anyway. Those danged fools done got the cows in One Tree Canyon and we got to whip 'em out before she hits."

He gave Gil one last puzzled, uncertain look. He said, "Funny what little things will bring the spunk up in a man." He whistled for his horse, and got hers, and they rode away . . .

THE two broke across the green floor of the valley as the first clap of thunder cracked above them. The sky had turned suddenly ominous and dark. There was a flash of lightning that showed Gail's father streaking down the other side of the valley. A low swell of noise burst into a wild, mixed bawling from a box canyon.

Rainey's face turned hard and earnest. "Those dogies are going to stampede!" he shouted. "Cut over and join your pa. Don't get in the mouth of that canyon yonder!"

His quirt flayed and he streaked off ahead, riding low and making a line along his horse's neck. The thunder cracked again, and lightning lit up the sky. The clouds suddenly dropped down upon the valley, dumping water, and roaring at themselves. The valley became a black hell, cut by lightning. The water beat down the washes into the canyon. It was already two inches on the valley floor.

Gail could no longer see her father, or Rainey, or even where she was going. She spurred her horse madly toward the canyon, trying to catch her father before he dipped down in. She had a bare instant of warning as the wild bawl of cattle swelled above the storm. The next instant her horse was fighting and slipping down into the canyon, the water from the valley sluicing down the trail up to its belly.

They were carried, half floating, pell-mell down into that bawling darkness of the canyon. The orange shots of riders cut the blackness as they tried to head off the herd from the treacherous trail that was now a raging torrent. Her horse was surrounded and swept along by the galloping, bawling, loco river of living flesh. Cows pressed against her legs, deafened her ears. Twice, they tried to climb over her horse in panic, their heads coming hard against her side. The heat, and the smell from rain beating off their bodies, dazed her.

The storm passed over as quickly as it had struck. She looked around dazedly, at that wild-eyed, crazed herd that milled and raced in all directions. They were still stampeding, but the stampede had not taken full form, and the groups broke and smashed back together like waves in an angry sea. She saw a white-nosed calf one instant in a clearing. That sea of red bodies closed back, then opened again, and the calf was a flattened pulp, half buried in mud and running water.

For an instant, she saw her father and Rainey, across the canyon, and tried desperately to reach them. A crazed bull suddenly reversed directions. He crashed with a wild bellow against her horse. He was gone, and the next instant the press of bodies relaxed and her horse tumbled forward to the ground.

Gail jumped clear, by instinct, and stood in the momentary clearing, looking desperately at the crazed, shifting sea around her. She heard her father and Rainey yell simultaneously, and then she saw a movement near the edge of the clearing, and knew that, next moment, a wild charge would be coming back.

In all that canyon, there was just one spot of refuge—the single tree that gave it its name. It was an outside chance, but it was the only one. She raced madly for the tree, the thunder of hoofs welling up behind her as she ran. Cows were shoving and massing around the tree. Gail took a flying leap onto their backs, sprawled, nearly slipped through twice, but reached a

limb. She climbed up and waved at the men, and sat back, trying to quiet her racing heart. Around the tree the stampede bucked and crowded. She sat clinging to the trunk, knowing that little by little the tree was being crowded over.

Rainey yelled, "Stop those guns!" and charged into the moving mass of cows. He went forward, was buffeted, succeeded in gaining fifty feet. His horse was caught by the bawling whirlpool and swept back.

He looked at Gail's father grimly. "The smell of the damn horse makes 'em worse!"

The Old Man shouted huskily, "They'll quiet in a bit, soon as this confounded water runs off."

Rainey jerked his head toward the sky. "Another thunderhead coming over. It's low and black!"

"Lord!" the Old Man murmured. "That tree will never last the full force of another stampede! Can we shoot a path through them?"

Rainey shook his head. "It'll set 'em off like a firecracker."

This took an instant that was an eternity, and in that same instant they watched the tree slowly giving way and going over.

WE GOT to quiet 'em before that next thunderhead," Rainey yelled over the bawling din. "We just got to quiet them!"

"That wild cow out there's the leader," the Old Man snapped. "That's the critter we got to get."

Rainey shouted, "Yeah. But we can't shoot her. They're bad enough *with* a leader. Jeepers knows how they'd be without one!"

"I'll try again," he added. Cussing and using his whip to clear a path, he drove into the milling mass, but was quickly forced back.

He had to run his horse up onto a shelf, and there he suddenly pulled in and stared across the canyon. Gil was over there,

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sitting on his horse, trying hard to figure the situation.

Rainey though, "Criminy, now he'll try to wedge in! That's all we need!"

He saw something glint in Gil's hand, and forgetful that Gil did not wear a gun, he thought the dude meant to try and shoot his way through. He thought of the fresh stampede that might mean, and his face went white.

But in that second, the clear, quivering notes of a harmonica came through the bawling of the herd. It was on a different key than the raw, deep bellowing, and it pierced the chaos of noise as cleanly as a bullet. He held the note, and Rainey watched a strange thing happen. Out in the middle of that wild red sea, the lead cow was charging across an open space. She stopped almost in her tracks, threw up her head, switched her tail, and listened.

Gil swept from the quivering note, and the notes that followed were a quieting, tender wail. They swelled out over that rioting herd, lifting and falling, and calling to that cow with the wild eyes.

The cow listened intently, started three times to plunge forward, pulled up each time with the press of bodies behind her shoving her a little ahead, but always quieting. And then suddenly she brought down her head and began to chew her cud.

In the next moment, her calm was passing through the herd. The stampede was over. Rainey Green was scratching his head.

Gil pushed his horse through to the tree, and got there just ahead of Rainey and Gail's father. Gail dropped down into his arms, and clung to him, shivering and crying, but laughing through her fears.

The Old Man came through the other side and said, "You better keep that music up a space, but what the dickens is that tune?" He cocked a squinting eye at the two and sized things up. "Well, whatever it is, it works on the cows," he said.

Gail straightened in Gil's arms, and looked at her father and laughed. She said, "It works swell on me, too, Pa!"

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"It's my love song," she said. "He made it up for me!"

Rainey looked at the two with a stiff, set face. But then he saw the violet lights in Gail's eyes, and he caught the amusement the Old Man was trying hard to hide. He remembered how he'd ridden Gail on his knee when she was a little girl, and suddenly he had things figured out.

His face relaxed, and he said to Gil, "Mister, if you told her that song was written for her, I say you're an out-and-out liar!"

The Old Man said sharply, "I think there's been enough of that, Rainey!"

"There ain't until I get it off my chest," Rainey said. "I say he *made* up that song first for the cow so he could get some milk. It's just because womenfolks are as ornery and loco as cows that it worked with Gail!"

Gail stared at him a moment, in joyful disbelief. Then she cried, "Rainey, you don't aim to bear a grudge!"

"I sure enough do!" Rainey corrected. "I aim to stay right here and bear a grudge until I teach this greenhorn how to ride and rope and shoot!" He grinned suddenly. "And until he teaches me something about womenfolks . . . and the danged cows!"

She caught the twinkle in her father's eye, and she gave Gil a violent hug. "Come on, drifter," she said, "get us out of here. These men have got these cows to work up the valley. They'll be kept pretty busy."

Gil said, "Reckon I got an awful lot to learn." He turned his horse toward the drying trail, and rode off, playing his music over Gail's head. The lead cow looked up and sniffed, and began to amble in his trail. Behind her, the herd took up, and shortly it was closing into a solid wedge that crowded up into the valley.

THE END

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

SPRING SALAD

in sufficient quantity to *serve twenty-five* is made as follows: Separate the yolks from the whites of 9 hardboiled eggs. Slice the whites thinly. Put in a large bowl with 2½ pounds of shredded lettuce, 1½ pints shredded raw carrots, ½ cup finely cut onion and ½ cup thinly sliced radishes. Chill thoroughly. Meanwhile mash the egg yolks. Add 2 teaspoons of salt, ¾ teaspoon dry mustard, 1½ tablespoons sugar, ½ teaspoon pepper and ½ cup salad oil. Mix thoroughly. Slowly stir in ½ cup of vinegar. Gradually add ½ cup of evaporated milk. Just before serving, fold in the chilled vegetable mixture and serve at once.

APRICOT WHIP

is an easily prepared dessert for a crowd. It can be served with cookies. For *twenty-five servings,* chill 1½ tall cans evaporated milk. Whip until fluffy. Add ⅓ cup lemon juice and continue whipping until stiff. Fold in following mixture: 1½ pints apricot pulp and 2⅔ cups sugar or strained honey. Put in sherbet cups and keep cold until time to serve. To make the apricot pulp, cover and cook 1½ pounds dried apricots in 1⅛ quarts of water until tender. Drain and

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put the fruit through a sieve. Prune pulp may be substituted if you like.

SKILLET TUNA SANDWICH

is a more ambitious recipe, but it's so good it's worth the effort of making. Combine 2 cups of flaked tuna with 1 cup of chopped celery, 4 teaspoons of lemon juice, salt and paprika to taste, and ½ cup of mayonnaise. Spread 8 slices of bread with butter, then spread on the tuna mixture. Top each with a thin slice of cheese and another slice of bread. Dip into a mixture of 4 eggs beaten with 2 cups of milk. Brown on both sides in butter in skillet. Serve immediately.

Now for some tasty family recipes. The next time you want something different, try:

HAM AND CHICKEN PIE

Here's a tempting dish that's easily made too. Try it when you have some leftover cooked ham. Cook 3 tablespoons chopped onion and ¼ cup chopped green pepper in butter or hot fat until onion is golden. Combine 1 can condensed cream of chicken soup with ½ cup milk, stir into onion mixture and heat to boiling. Add 2 cups of diced cooked ham and 1 tablespoon of lemon juice. Pour into greased baking dish and cover with

SWEET POTATO CRUST

Combine 1 cup of flour with 1 teaspoon baking powder and ½ teaspoon salt. Com-

bine 1 cup cold, mashed sweet potatoes, ⅓ cup melted fat and 1 beaten egg. Whip vigorously. Add to the dry ingredients. Mix. Pat this crust to fit the casserole. Gash to permit exit of steam. Bake in moderate oven forty minutes.

CHILI POT ROAST

is a winner. Cook a large, minced onion in ¼ cup fat until it is soft. Remove. Dredge a three-pound pot roast with flour, sprinkle with 1 teaspoon of salt, 1 tablespoon of chili powder and 1 teaspoon of dried celery leaves. Brown in the hot fat. Add 1 can condensed tomato soup, 1 tablespoon prepared mustard and the onion. Cover and simmer one hour. Add 1½ cups drained lima beans that have been soaked over night. Simmer until meat and limas are tender, about an hour. Serves six generously.

EASY TAMALE PIE

A good recipe for inexperienced cooks! Slice tamales from a sixteen-ounce can. Line a two-quart baking dish with tamale slices. Combine 2 cups cubed, leftover beef (roast or pot roast), 1 six-ounce can tomato paste, one fifteen-ounce can whole kernel corn, 1 cup sliced, ripe olives, 2 teaspoons chili powder and 1 can of consomme. Pour into the tamale lined dish. Top with 1½ ounce package of corn chips and ½ cup grated, Parmesian cheese. Bake in moderate oven about an hour.

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(Continued from page 28)

Miranda said, "I thought he was a gentleman. I thought I'd—never have to work again."

Her dad said, "There's no escape from work, Kitten."

Miranda pointed a finger at Tex Wister. "*He* doesn't."

Tex Wister grinned his infectious grin. "Not afoot, maybe. But you ought to see me on a horse, honey. That's what I figure to do in California. Start me a ranch."

Tex flopped down comfortably on the blanket, propped on an elbow, facing her. "Me and your pa been planning. I could headquarter in town. Maybe the same town your pa picks for his newspaper. That way you could set type and—and keep house for your husband."

Miranda snorted indelicately. Strangely, she was beginning to feel better. "Chore for two big lazy screwballs the rest of my life? You think I'd like that?"

Her dad sat down beside Tex. His knee creaked. He said gravely, "I think you would like it, Miranda. I've watched you through your girlhood. You're made to be a hard-working, loving wife and mother, sacrificing for your men. That's when you're happiest."

Miranda stared. Her voice was faint. "Is it?"

"I think it is," her dad said.

Tex said, "So do I."

"By golly," Miranda said. "Boys, maybe you're right."

THE END

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(Continued from page 77)

cuffs on his wrists, and another man with a big star on his vest.

"That'll be enough of this weddin'!" Jim called sharply. "It isn't goin' on!"

"Fairfield, what's the meaning of this?" Señor Stryker snarled.

"You ought to know!" Jim returned. "When I drifted into this country two years ago, I hadn't an idea in the world that you were the man who shot my father in the back ten years ago. I didn't even have any ideas of revenge. But you figured if I ever found you out, your life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. So you bluffed along, pretendin' to help me and give me a start in ranchin'—an' then one day they found a man dead, with my gun beside him!"

Jim wavered a bit, and Anita sensed that he had to force himself to keep going.

"I didn't have a chance to buck the evidence, so I hightailed into Mexico where the law couldn't touch me. I hung around the border, slippin' over sometimes to try to find out who the real murderer was. Down below the border I heard that Zig—" he indicated the handcuffed man—"had done some killin' for you. But I didn't suspect you. Then one night ten days ago I went to see you in your private office, thinkin' you'd help me. You let slip that you knew my father—an' right away I got suspicious. Then when you started fiddlin' with your gun I knew you aimed to shoot me an' claim self-defense. So I hiked out into the alley!"

Jim Fairfield took a deep breath.

"I figured Zig might know somethin'. I've got friends south of the border, where he was runnin' from the law. Through them I found him. He shot me, but I got him to confess. He admitted that you'd hired him to do the killin' in hopes the law would put me out of the way. He told me how you'd shot my father in the back ten years ago—"

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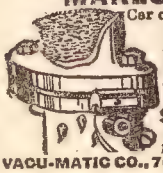

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Señor Stryker's voice was a screech. His hand dipped inside his coat.

Then Anita threw herself against Stryker's arm. It was enough to deflect his aim. And before he could pull the trigger a second time, Jim's gun was flaming. Señor Stryker, with a gasp, collapsed almost at Anita's feet.

Anita felt as if she were going to faint. She wavered, and it took Jim's arms to hold her upright. His warm, strong arms, not so strong now, but still with power enough in them to enfold her to him.

"Niñita!" his whisper came. "It was hell, leaving you here in this house! But I had to work fast, because I heard Zig was aimin' to jump Mexico for South America. I wondered what you'd think when Stryker put the police on my trail, that night I went to the Long Bar—"

"I—I didn't hear. I've been here at the ranch and no word reached me."

"I was almost frantic—afraid you'd be married to him before I could get Zig an' come here. Just in time! And now—"

Jim straightened, and with his arm still around Anita, turned to the padre. "We've started a weddin', padre. We might as well finish it!"

"But, Jeemy," Anita whispered. "You deed not ask me eef I weesh to marry you."

"I'm not askin' you to marry me. You asked me first. Remember? An' now I'm acceptin'!"

And suddenly little Anita had a heart again, where only a leaden pendulum had swung. A heart—and a husband! For when the padre asked her if she took Señor Jeemy to be her husband, she said in such a loud voice, "I do!" that Jimmy jumped, in spite of his weakness. Then he grinned.

"That's the [illegible]" he said. "An' I'm sayin' it the same [illegible]. *I do!*"

Neither of them heard the padre's benediction, for Anita was in Jimmy's arms, and words didn't matter!

(Continued from page 10)

you print my plea. Here's some dope about myself:

I am a South African girl of 17, with fair hair and clear blue eyes. People tell me my eyes go very dark when I'm annoyed or lose my Irish temper. I like most sports, but my favorites are ice skating, horseback riding, swimming, rugby and basketball. I love dancing and all kinds of music and writing letters. I promise a speedy reply to all who write. So, please won't you fill my mailbox with nice, thick letters?

JOAN WHITLOCK
17, Queens Street
Bertrams, Johannesburg
Transvaal, South Africa

Brown-Eyed Beverly

Dear Editor:

I am in a tuberculosis sanatorium and hope it won't make any difference to people who want pen pals. I'm 15 years old and have brown hair and eyes and 5 ft. 4¼ in. tall.

Almost all sports are favorites with me, and I like dancing and good music and reading. Hope to hear from boys and girls from the ages of 15 to 19.

BEVERLY MARTINEZ
Weimar Sanatorium
Weimar, California

Radio Man

Dear Editor:

May I get on board the Pony Express? I have a rather lonely job and plenty of time to write. I play mother to a radio transmitter in a little hut, way out in the country.

I'd especially like to hear from those interested in gospel singing and piano, although all are invited to write. As photography is a pet hobby, I'll be glad to exchange photos with all who care to.

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I'm in the thirties, 5 ft. 11 in., 150 bs., light complexion, hazel eyes and have medium dark hair.

JOHN H. OXFORD
201 Maple Street
Paris, Tennessee

Musical Miss

Dear Editor:

Is it possible for me to ride the Pony Express? I'm a farm girl, aged 18, 5 ft. 7½ in. tall, have blue eyes and golden brown hair. My hobbies are many, writing to pen pals, music, cooking, sewing, collecting Western music and songs. Love anything Western. I'm part owner—temporarily, I should say—of a part palomino pony.

When I graduate from school, my future will be pretty uncertain. I have thought of enlisting in the Lady Marines and I've had a chance to make music a career, so my mind isn't made up yet. I've been a guest on the local radio station a couple of times and can go back whenever I wish.

My sister plays the piano accordion, and I have an electric Hawaiian guitar. I also do some singing and yodeling and can play the piano and accordion.

Is there anyone lonesome who wants a few letters to cheer him up? Just have him drop me a line, and I'll do my best. Anyone is welcome.

INEZ GARDALEN
Route 2
Alden, Iowa

Captain Cowpoke

Dear Editor:

How about giving a chance to a lonely ex-cowpoke? I've been stationed in Chaffee for over a year now, and while Arkansas is all right, I still yearn for Western people.

I'm 6 ft. 2 in. tall, weigh 198 lbs., have black hair and brown eyes. I would love to hear from anyone and everyone between the ages of twenty and forty—especially girls who are interested in horses and ranches. I was born and raised on a ranch in Texas and now own my own spread.

Come on, folks, especially you pretty gals. Send me letters and pictures. I promise faithfully to answer each and every one.

CAPTAIN JOSEPH C. RICE, JR. 01285499
Combat Command B
S-4
Bldg. T-0212
Camp Chaffee, Ark.

Montana's Joy

Dear Editor:

I think your Pony Express department is truly wonderful, and I hope you will try to find a small space for my letter.

I am 13 years old, have light brown hair, gray-green eyes, weigh 115 lbs. and stand 5 ft. 4 in. in my stocking feet.

My hobbies are swimming, horseback riding,

reading and writing letters—and collecting pictures of pen pals. My favorite sports are skating and basketball. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with those who want to.

Please, won't someone help out a lonely Montana girl?

JOY BATEMAN
Box 163
Dillon, Mont.

Corporal Tom

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely soldier stationed up in Alaska, and I would like to hear from girls from 17 to 25.

My hobbies are roller skating, skiing, swimming, ice skating, horseback riding, and I am greatly fascinated by good hillbilly records.

Photos will be gladly exchanged. I love to write and receive letters. So see if you can't get me a whole basketful of pen pals.

CPL. THOMAS P. DOUGHTY
RA 18145852
558 QM. Svc. Co.
APO 949, c/o PM
Seattle, Wash.

We'll be back with more letters next time. Meanwhile, send your pleas to Pony Express, c/o RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York. We'll print all we possibly can.

Until next time—adios, amigos.

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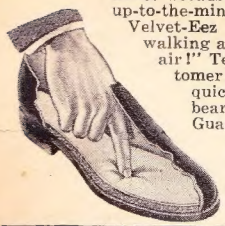
Sales build up from friend to friend quickly like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from $5 to $10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES



People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "Walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales! These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.

Velvet-Eez

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

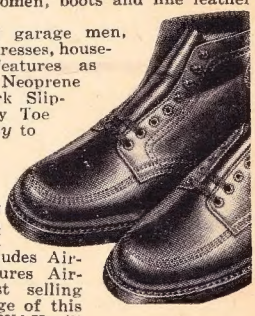
Dept. M-895,
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

BIG, STEADY PROFITS FOR YOU—NO OVERHEAD!

You have the advantages of a profitable shoe store business *without* the expenses of rent, light, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

No Experience Needed—Make Money First Hour!

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales the first day. You feature smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.



Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, waitresses, housewives—*everybody!* Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes *easy* to sell!

SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. It includes Air-Cushion demonstrator, features Air-Cushion shoes, — other fast selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity, rush coupon NOW! You'll be glad you did!

SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager—Box M-895
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE my Powerful Selling Outfit—so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

Name .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

O'Keefe's OLD VIENNA BEER

Extra Smooth...Clear and Light...
Old Vienna...Treats you right.

UNION MADE

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